



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>



3 3433 07495217 1

The Echo of Voices

Richard Curle



Fiction, Scottish



NCW
Curie

Fiction, Scottish



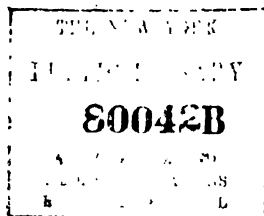
New
Curle



**THE ECHO
OF VOICES**



**COPYRIGHT, 1917, BY
ALFRED A. KNOFF**



**PROPERTY
OF THE
NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY**

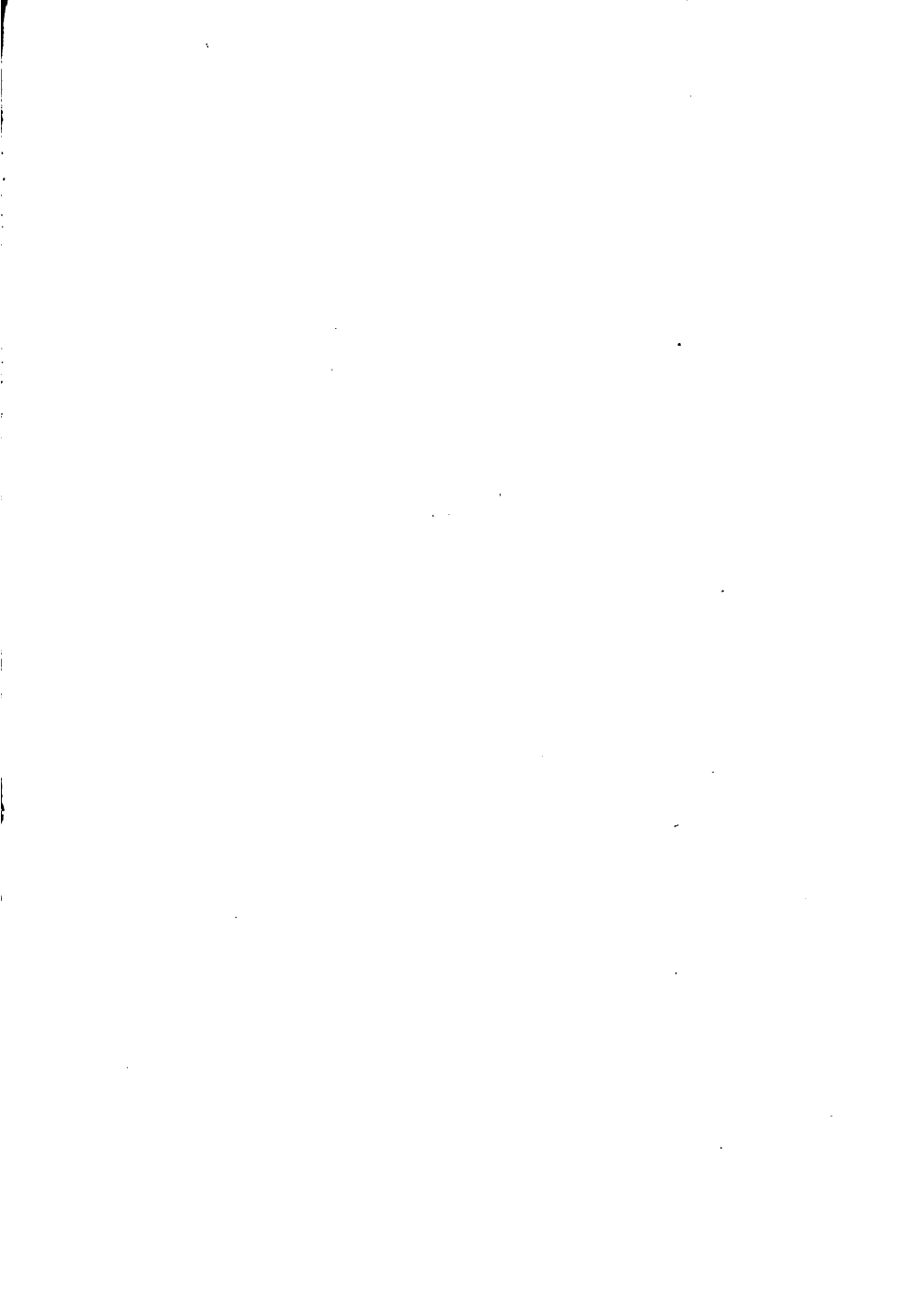
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

AUG 1917

R

TO
G. L. SARTORIS

13-2/10-1



CONTENTS

The Two Dependants 11

Midnight 79

His Kingdom 101

The Would-be Friends 123

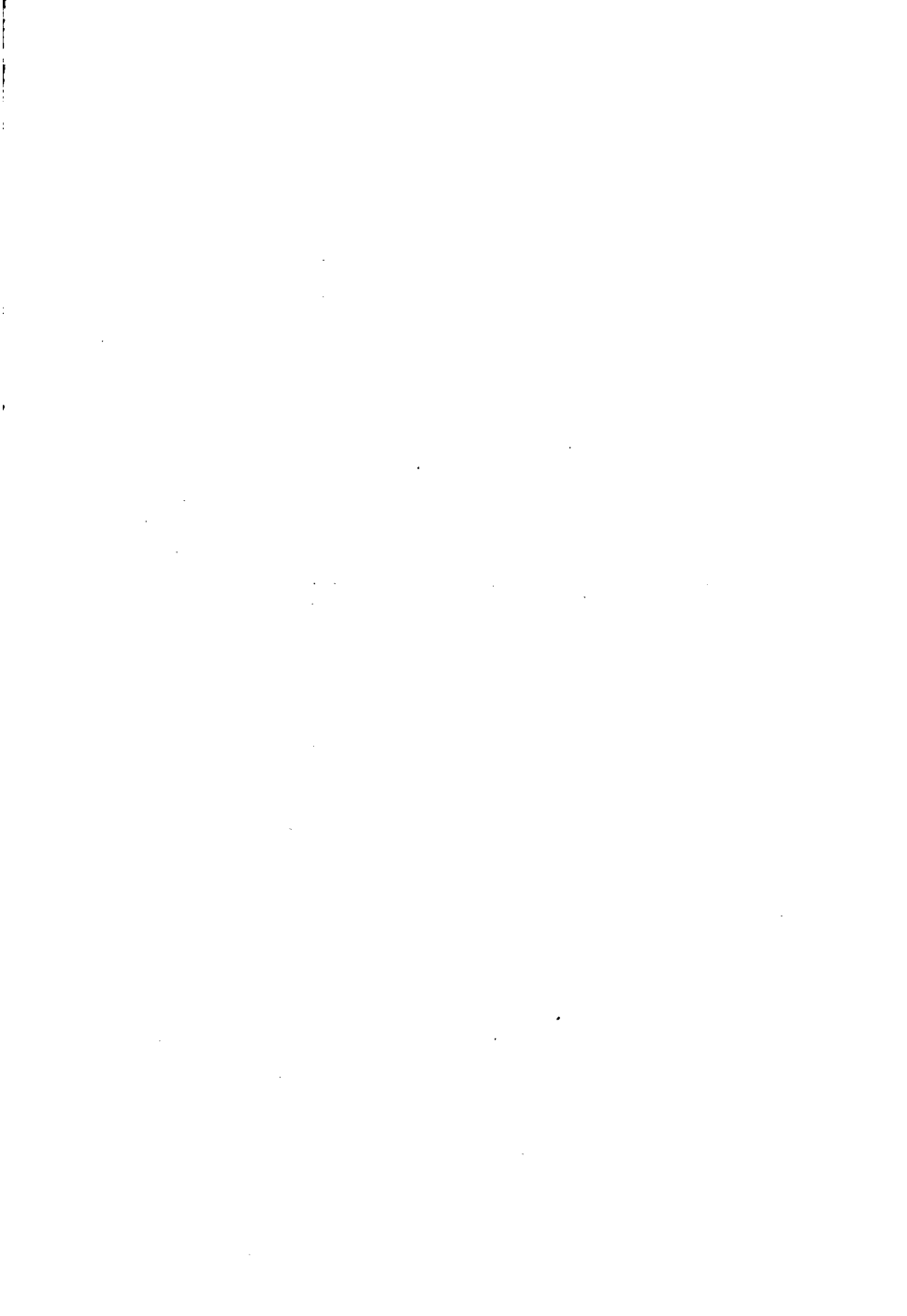
General Service 171

Monsieur Clavel 201

Deep Down 227

Nineteen 257

THE TWO DEPENDANTS



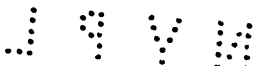
THE TWO DEPENDANTS

HE had not made a good impression on the Court. There was something altogether too expansive and urbane about him. Moreover, quite apart from the fact that the case against him looked extremely ugly, he was so surprisingly like the popular idea of a financial shark that every one had at once made up their minds that he was guilty before a word had been said. His name was Hubert Percival Masham, he was about forty years old, and he was accused of shady transactions as a Company Promoter, and Outside Broker, a General Agent, and God only knows what else. He looked healthy, in spite of an inclination to stoutness which was more or less concealed by the fact that it was that sort of general, firm stoutness which overtakes hearty men of early middle-age who have always led a sedentary life and eaten too well. He perspired freely (and even when he wasn't perspiring he gave the impression that he was just going to), and when he wiped his forehead a delicate odour of scent was wafted as far as the jury-box. He had large, white hands, the nails of which were beautifully

The Echo of Voices

manicured. He would have been very well dressed if only everything had not been slightly overdone. The polish on his boots was too bright, the crease on his trousers too marked, the gloss on his hat too immaculate. There was a suggestion of pomade on his hair. His face was clean-shaven, florid, and when he opened his mouth to smile (which was frequently) several gold stoppings showed distinctly amongst his even, white teeth. In his tie he wore a pearl pin, quite genuine, but rather too large to be in the best of taste. His shirt, socks, and handkerchief were of a uniform shade of pale mauve and it was evident that he had given the greatest attention to his appearance. He belonged, in fact, to a recognised type, to the type of person who is in the City but not of it, who appears there suddenly with a blaze of trumpets and is as suddenly gone as any thief in the night. He was one of these men who receive you in elegant offices, the unmistakable air of impermanence about which is lost upon you in the affability and conviction of their conversation. On business, indeed, they are so convincing that clients have been known to declare that they really can't quite believe the world is as perfect as all that. Perhaps they are bewildered by their prospective good fortune. Well, it is an enviable state!

They are an amazing product of our time, these financiers *de la lune*, with their everlasting optimism,



The Two Dependants

their urgent and cryptic conversations on the telephone, their power of making you purchase things which no one on earth could have faith in. And they always appear to have more money than they know what to do with, until suddenly they have no money at all. Then it comes out that they have never *really* had any — but no ordinary person can understand why some money is money and other money (which buys the same things) isn't. But manipulators are optimistic by nature. You should hear the speeches they make before the Official Receiver! And if, unfortunately, they ever find themselves in the Dock they behave in a dignified and admirable way. Perhaps they really do have a feeling of injured innocence. Why not? At any rate they invariably give prompt, full, and engaging explanations of everything. And yet you may be quite sure that however scandalous the things are that come out, there are much more scandalous things that never do come out. But you wouldn't think it from their appearance. They look more like the judge than the judge himself does. No, you would never think it unless their very magnificence made you doubtful. Then observing them more closely it might dawn upon you that there was something wrong. You might begin to distrust that rounded perfection. It might remind you of an over-ripe plum which conceals a wasp. And you might think

The Echo of Voices

all at once, "Suppose I had played cards with him, would he have paid?" But your doubts would be wrong. Although he would probably have beaten you (and quite fairly), yet, if you had happened to win, he would have been most punctilious about paying. (They are the sort of men who carry big sums of money in their evening trousers.) On the other hand, if you had played stocks and shares with him. . . . But that's too painful to think of. . . .

Mr. Masham, sitting in the dock with his head resting gracefully on his white hand, was aware that sentiment was against him. He was listening to a very unpleasant speech from the opposing Counsel and though he was trying to follow it carefully his mind would keep wandering over all sorts of unimportant subjects. The interval for luncheon was near and a faint, persistent stir began to make itself felt throughout the court. For almost the first time in his life Mr. Masham did not feel hungry. He did not even feel thirsty. What was it the fellow was saying? — mumble, mumble, mumble! What an ass! He took out his handkerchief and dabbed his forehead. Ass! He let his eyes pass slowly over all the faces before him and he read there nothing but hostility, bitter, prying hostility. Suddenly he smiled. Down at the back of the court one pair of eyes was fixed on him with a very different expression. They were the eyes of Mr. Barker, his oldest clerk.

The Two Dependants

Of course, old is a comparative term with men of Mr. Masham's stamp. Their business is founded on the magic word new. It has the same sort of attraction for foolish speculators as new theologies have for foolish Christians. Still, in this light, Mr. Barker *was* an old servant. He had been with Mr. Masham for nearly six years. And he was invaluable to him because he was so transparently honest. He belonged to as distinct a type as did Mr. Masham himself. He was one of these men whose extraordinary simplicity is combined with something utterly unyielding. His outer appearance exactly represented the man himself. In no society in the world could he have been taken for anything but a clerk. He had originally walked into Mr. Masham's office in answer to an advertisement. Mr. Masham knew nothing about him, but he knew a good deal about character. "That's the man for me," he had thought. Mr. Barker had said very little, but standing in the middle of the room he had looked austerely at the prosperous Mr. Masham. "Yes, that's my man," thought Mr. Masham again. He knew quite well that the austerity of Mr. Barker was not personal at all but the natural austerity of a simple and upright heart. He was correct. It would never have occurred to Mr. Barker to doubt the propriety of an employer's actions. Such liberties didn't enter into his theory of the universe. In his own life he was

The Echo of Voices

a man of the most rigid conduct. In Balham he belonged to a sect which deprecated every sort of amusement as the work of the Devil. Even when he had to pass the National Gallery Mr. Barker averted his head. And yet he had been Mr. Masham's confidential clerk for years without suspecting anything. It's no use being astonished at such people — they do exist and there's an end of it. They're inexplicable. In his own voiceless way Mr. Barker worshipped Mr. Masham. To begin with he had been nearly a year out of work when Mr. Masham engaged him, and when you have five children all under nine and an ailing wife and have never earned more than £3 a week the state of your affairs does not bear contemplation. But what really won Mr. Barker's heart was something that happened about a year after he had entered Mr. Masham's service. One morning when he had brought in the letters as usual and was waiting silently for Mr. Masham's instructions, the latter suddenly looked up and said, "What's the matter with you to-day, Barker?" It was no wonder he had spoken for Mr. Barker looked terribly white, shaken, and broken-up. "There is nothing the matter with me, sir," said the literal Mr. Barker, gazing with what seemed stern disapproval at his employer, "but I have family trouble at home." "What family trouble?" asked Mr. Masham. "My wife died at seven o'clock last

The Two Dependants

night," replied Mr. Barker firmly. "Good Lord, man, why did you come to the office then?" ejaculated Mr. Masham, quite forgetting in his astonishment to make a more fitting rejoinder. Mr. Barker did not reply. He did not think there was any suitable reply. He had come to the office because he always had to come to the office every day. "Get your coat and hat and go home at once," said Mr. Masham. Mr. Barker went out without a word. "Stop, come back!" shouted Mr. Masham all of a sudden. He was very red in the face. "This is a bad thing for you, Barker, I'm afraid. You have my most sincere condolences. Aren't you left with a lot of small children or something?" "I have five children," answered Mr. Barker, whose sense of decency was instinctively shocked by these personal conversations with an employer. "Five children," echoed Mr. Masham, "and all young, dear me! And then there'll be the funeral. Really, Barker, I'm very, very sorry for you. And I dare say the illness will cost you a pretty penny. Well, well!" He had gone over to his desk and unlocked his cash-box. "Now, Barker, don't thank me but take this. No, I won't listen to a word. Take it and go home. You'll find it useful. Go at once, Barker." Mr. Barker trembled, bowed stiffly, and turned on his heel. Mr. Masham had given him four £5 notes.

The Echo of Voices

A less simple minded man might have resented this charity as an answer to his grief, but Mr. Barker was not complicated in this sort of way. He took things naturally. Far from being offended he was deeply touched. He little knew, luckily, that the money he had taken really belonged to an old lady, a very stupid and greedy old lady, whom Mr. Masham had just relieved of £4,000 in exchange for some worthless certificates.

It was from this one act, so easily performed, that Mr. Barker had come to venerate Mr. Masham as the best and kindest of men. He hardly ever spoke of it; he was, indeed, scarcely conscious of it for the most part, but when the crash came he showed his devotion in the only way in his power — he stuck to Mr. Masham without asking a single question. He was not curious, he was only bewildered. He recognised the hand of the Devil (who was a definite person to Mr. Barker) and that sufficed him. His brain worked along narrow lines. He was not given to independent thought, he didn't ask himself questions. Not even at the back of his head did he have the slightest doubt of Mr. Masham's innocence. And, strangest thing of all, the evidence of the last three days had made no difference. From the very beginning of the trial he had sat in the well of the court, listening with a grave and attentive air — and understanding nothing. It was outside his idea of things

The Two Dependants

that Mr. Masham could have committed fraud, and therefore he did not go into court with the question, "Is he innocent or guilty?" but merely with the dumb resignation of a Christian who watches the temporary triumph of evil. He heard sums of money mentioned, he saw clients whom he had known for years denouncing Mr. Masham in the most outrageous terms, and he did not flinch. No whisper of doubt entered his heart. Both defence and prosecution had wished to subpoena him, but both had finally decided that he had better be left alone. . . .

Mr. Masham and his clerk had lunched together every day of the trial. They were rather dismal lunches. Mr. Barker was not apt at general conversation and Mr. Masham saw too clearly how things were trending to feel cheerful. Still the presence of Mr. Barker, perhaps the only person in the world who really believed in him, gave him an odd and unexpected comfort. He tried to crack a few jokes, but not a smile appeared upon the morose countenance of the faithful clerk. Mr. Barker pitied Mr. Masham profoundly, but he did not show his pity. When he spoke it was solely of business. They did not discuss the trial. Mr. Masham knew nothing of Mr. Barker's theories about the Devil's complicity in his downfall. In happier days they would have made him roar with laughter, but he would probably not have listened now. He was en-

The Echo of Voices

grossed in details for saving the wreck of his business. He plied Mr. Barker with questions, he sketched plans for the future. It was true that Mr. Barker was no longer his servant, but he still felt a sense of proprietorship in him. His conversation was as peremptory as ever. In Mr. Barker, also, there was not the least change. Thus they would talk over their lunch, while secretly gnawing at them beneath their words was a sense of misery and hopeless disaster. . . .

It was, then, the face of his ex-clerk that Mr. Masham had discerned in the crowd. "Poor old Barker," he murmured half-contemptuously. Mr. Barker did not put his thought into words. At that instant counsel raised his voice for an unusually eloquent period. Mr. Masham frowned. "Still at it," he muttered irritably; "what's he saying now?" and he tried to concentrate his mind anew. But the bustle in the court was growing louder. All at once the judge rose, the usher called out in a loud voice, and every one jumped up. The Court had adjourned for luncheon.

Mr. Masham and Mr. Barker met at the appointed place. Both of them knew that it would be their last meeting, for it was obvious that the trial was about to end. Mr. Masham had a great deal to say and he began to talk business at once. Suddenly he remarked:—

The Two Dependants

"You know, Barker, it'll finish this afternoon?"

"Yes," said Mr. Barker.

"And you know, of course, what the result will be?"

"Yes," said Mr. Barker again, in exactly the same intonation.

"Well, look here, Barker, as soon as it's over I want you to go at once to my house and tell my wife. You're the only man I can trust to do that properly. I wouldn't let her come here, of course."

"I'm to go and tell Mrs. Masham?" faltered the clerk.

"You heard me?"

"Very good, sir."

"You are to go to the house and insist on seeing her yourself. And impress upon her that the newspaper reports are sure to be nothing but a pack of lies. Now mind, Barker, you are to tell her that I sent you especially."

Mr. Barker sighed. It was so deep a sigh that his former master asked him abruptly, "You do believe in me, don't you, Barker?"

The incorruptible Mr. Barker looked at him as though he had not heard correctly.

"I don't think about it at all, sir," he said deliberately; "I know that you're innocent."

"Thanks, thanks," responded Mr. Masham. "And don't you ever change your opinion, Barker."

The Echo of Voices

It was the kind of remark that Mr. Barker did not understand. He paid no notice to it. But he looked sternly at Mr. Masham as if reprobating his levity. As a matter of fact an abysmal gloom had overspread his soul. As to himself and his five children they were in God's hands, but as to Mr. Masham there could be no doubt that he had been given over to the clutches of the Devil. A conviction had been slowly forming in his brain that perhaps Mr. Masham (who was addicted to strong language) was an infidel and that this affliction had come upon him as an awful warning. He was a man of few words, and when he did speak his tongue reflected accurately his conventional and prosaic mind, but all at once he was forced to say in an almost menacing voice:—

“Do you believe in God, Mr. Masham?”

“Do I believe in God?” echoed the astounded Mr. Masham; “do I believe in Divine Providence? No, Barker, I don't. If there was a God he would not have brought me to this pass. Do you hear that, Barker? That's not the sort of thing God would do. Here am I punished for nothing at all. Nothing! Simply for being original. Wouldn't that shake any one's belief in God?” He spoke with vehemence. He was firmly convinced at that moment that he was the most wronged of men. “Don't talk to me about religion! I spit it out! Bah, it gives

The Two Dependants

me a nasty taste in the mouth! No, if you want me to believe in anything I'll — I'll believe in the Devil. That's more in my line."

Mr. Barker shuddered.

"Assuredly there is a Devil," he murmured.

But Mr. Masham only laughed unpleasantly. He had suddenly recollected that, after all, his conduct had not been quite so blameless.

"Get along with you, Barker!" he said. "God or Devil, it's all one to me. The whole thing's nonsense. At any rate I'm not in the mood for sentiment. I feel, well, I'll tell what I feel, I feel that I'm cornered. That's the only thing I can think of."

Mr. Barker regarded him with a look of pain.

"Put your trust in God, sir," he whispered. "Only believe in Him. There's no other comfort. We are all in His hands, Mr. Masham."

Mr. Masham made a gesture of impatience but he could not stop Mr. Barker, who continued hoarsely:

"Only say, 'Lord I believe, help Thou my unbelief.' Only say that, sir, and everything will be well with you."

"Come, stow it, Barker!" shouted Mr. Masham angrily. "What on earth's the matter with you to-day? You're talking just like a copy-book! Good God, man, don't you realise how I'm placed?"

Mr. Barker flushed.

The Echo of Voices

"Remember that you're an innocent man, sir," he mumbled.

But this remark did not seem much more to Mr. Masham's liking.

"Yes, innocent, of course. Of course I'm innocent. Every one knows that except those scoundrels. And they know it really. And don't you forget, Barker, that I'm innocent when you hear people talking. I know what people are. They won't leave me alone. They'll go on repeating lies about me till they almost come to believe them. Brutes! But we'll have the laugh on them one of these days, Barker! I won't be in *there* all my life, and when I come out we've got to start afresh. Do you hear that?"

"I shall be ready, sir," said Mr. Barker quietly.

"Yes, Barker, I know you will be. You're a faithful friend. I can't do much for you now but later — yes, I shan't forget. And here, Barker, I want you to take this as a memento." He had suddenly pulled out his gold watch and chain. "Don't be afraid. It doesn't belong to the creditors. It's mine right enough. Or, rather, it's my wife's. Everything I've got on is. Thank goodness she has a little something left. I told her I wanted to give them you. 'I want to present Barker with the watch and chain,' I said; 'he's the only honest man I know. He's stuck to me through thick and thin.'"

The Two Dependants

She agreed at once. She's got a great opinion of you. You remember the wreath she sent when your wife died? Oh, yes, we'll come out on top yet, Barker."

Mr. Barker was deeply embarrassed. He took the watch and chain mechanically.

"You — you are too good to me, sir," he muttered in a broken voice. "I don't like to take it. I don't really, sir. You have always been too good to me. And to think that now — Oh, sir, the Devil is frightfully strong!"

"That's all right, Barker," said Mr. Masham, waving his remarks aside. "Listen to me. I'm not likely to see you again for a long time, but I want you to keep in touch with me through my wife. You've got a memo. of all these matters we've been discussing the last few days. Above all, follow the markets. Don't let anything escape you. We have to keep the skeleton together, clients and all. That'll be the trouble, the clients. So many of them are hopeless. I know the sort of thing — deluge the Official Receiver with abusive letters and think they'll keep me from ever holding my head up again. Charming, isn't it? But they won't succeed. Not they! And don't you forget, Barker, that it is you who have got charge of my reputation now. I've always regarded you as a sort of partner — well, not a partner exactly — but you know what I mean.

The Echo of Voices

And depend upon it, anything you can do for our future will repay itself a thousandfold."

He arose from his seat and Mr. Barker, who felt dazed, rose also.

"Remember I am relying absolutely on you," said Mr. Masham impressively.

Mr. Barker bent his head. He was deplorably lacking in the appropriate words for such an occasion. He could not speak, but if he had spoken it would have been to beg Mr. Masham to fall upon his knees that very night. When he was alone he made his way back slowly to the well of the court. The last stage of the trial was beginning. . . .

Mr. Barker waited till the very end and then wandered out into the warm sunlight of the May evening. No one noticed him. He was not a person who attracted attention. There was nothing remarkable about him. In the whole of his life he had never unburdened himself to any one, not only because it had never occurred to him but because he had nothing to unburden. He knew what love was, and poverty, and grief, but he accepted them without a word. He had no obscure yearnings. When he prayed night and morning he did so with fervour, but along recognised lines. He did not ask God to remove his doubts, because he had none. His prayers were long, earnest, but quite impersonal. And yet he used to rise from them as though refreshed by the

The Two Dependants

Water of Life. Never had he felt any qualms and never had he felt superior to any one. He was convinced that Christianity, as taught in his chapel, led to salvation and that most people were irretrievably damned, but he was not arrogant, he was humble — or rather, perhaps he was nothing at all. Indeed, he had had no philosophy of conduct other than the natural inclination to do what he knew was right. But as he stood there, blinking in the sunlight, he realised all at once very dimly that the machinery of life was, as it were, imperfect at the core. He recalled Mr. Masham's last look at him from the dock. He had forgotten somehow to account for everything by reference to the Devil. The Devil was a real individual to Mr. Barker, but he was real in a religious sense — that is to say he was real in a different plane. Mr. Barker had accepted his poverty, the death of his wife, all the ills of life without losing faith in the propriety of existence. He believed in a glorious resurrection. He took things naturally. But perhaps, just because it was so bizarre, so utterly outside all his experience, he could not, illogical as it was, see in Mr. Masham's fate anything but a misfortune, which, though due to his own infidelity or the sheer wickedness of the Devil, was yet monstrously inexcusable. He did not, of course, put it clearly to himself. It was not clear, it was vague; so vague, indeed, that he only

The Echo of Voices

felt an uneasy, gloomy cloud upon his mind. Standing on the pavement he seemed lost in abstraction. The frown on his forehead gave his face a more than usually stern and uncompromising expression. No one regarded him. He was exactly like thousands of other solitary men. He stood there for several minutes before he remembered what he had still to do. . . .

Mr. Masham's house was situated in the North of London, in one of those districts full of lanes and enclosed gardens where the early summer nights throw a secret veil of romance over blurred streets and distant cries. It stood back in its own grounds and in the falling dusk the livid colour of its walls seemed to glow within the dark circle of trees. The air had freshened in the warm, sweet gusts of the approaching night and as Mr. Barker trudged heavily up the drive he smelt the grass around him as though knee-deep in dewy fields. Not a light shone upon the sombre face of the house. At the best of times Mr. Barker was not romantic. Romance would have frightened him, it would have smacked of the scarlet woman. But at the present moment he noticed nothing at all. He only wanted to get to the house and deliver his message.

He reached the door at last and ringing the bell he waited patiently. He heard steps coming towards him in the hall, but before the door could be opened

The Two Dependants

a window was thrown up above him and a voice called out, "Is this you, Hubert?"

"No, ma'am," answered Mr. Barker gravely.

Down slammed the window with a crash. At the same instant the figure of a servant girl appeared in the open door.

"I have come to see Mrs. Masham" said Mr. Barker.

"Tell me first, it's about him, isn't it?" whispered the girl.

"Inform Mrs. Masham that a man is waiting to see her," said Mr. Barker, looking straight in front of him.

"Who is it?" cried the other woman from the top of the staircase.

"It's Mr. Barker, ma'am," answered the clerk, raising his voice.

There was no response but he thought he heard something like a stifled scream. Above him a door shut loudly in the stillness.

"You had better come in," said the girl, scrutinising him vindictively.

He entered without saying a word. The door closed behind him and the girl, pointing to a chair, disappeared at once. The lamp had not been lit and the flicker of the dusk filtered in through the two long narrow windows of the hall. Mr. Barker did not sit down, he did not even move from the mat.

The Echo of Voices

After a time the girl reappeared and beckoned to him to follow her. She led him upstairs into a big room lit by one shaded lamp upon a table. And there, behind the lamp, sat the lady he had come to see. She was one of these handsome, fast-looking women of about thirty-five who seem to reach that age at a bound and to remain there for twenty years or so, in short the sort of woman who looks at her best in a foreign casino, where, in the Continental style, she can wear with her high-necked evening frock an enormous hat with a green ostrich plume drooping over it. She was dressed expensively and with an eye to her rather flamboyant cast of beauty. But at that moment she was not looking her best; she was looking distraught. Her eyes were fixed tragically upon Mr. Barker. He inclined his head.

"Well, what is it?" she flung at him.

"Mr. Masham, ma'am, said I was to come myself to tell you —"

"Tell me what?"

"That he has been unjustly sentenced to eighteen months' imprisonment."

"Ach!" said Mrs. Masham, recoiling in her chair and staring at him like a tigress.

"It is a miscarriage of justice," muttered Mr. Barker.

In his baggy trousers, with his worn coat buttoned across his chest, big, broad-shouldered, very

The Two Dependants

strong, with his fanatical eyes and the high cheek-bones of a Scotsman, he stood stiffly before her, like an out of work clerk come to beg for assistance.

Mrs. Masham signed to him to approach closer.

"Tell me everything," she gasped.

Mr. Barker told her everything. His indignation made him eloquent. Mr. Masham seemed like some Christian Saint encompassed by the armies of the Fiend.

"And to-night they'll take him and put him into that awful dress!" broke suddenly from his listener.

"It is only the soul that is of importance, ma'am," answered Mr. Barker; "they cannot touch his soul."

"A convict," wailed Mrs. Masham. "Oh, my God, my God!"

"Use that name in supplication, ma'am," said Mr. Barker solemnly. "He is our one hope. Only this afternoon I begged Mr. Masham, yes, ma'am, I begged him to pray. There is comfort in prayer. I—I prayed on the 'bus on my way here and I felt strengthened."

"You believe in prayer?" asked Mrs. Masham incredulously. She appeared quite recovered strangely enough.

"I do, ma'am," responded Mr. Barker, his whole face shining with renewed faith. "Oh, ma'am, I too have known what sorrow is. But God's mercy is as boundless as the ocean. He never forgets his serv-

The Echo of Voices

ants. When my wife died He sent your husband to comfort me. It was not what Mr. Masham gave me, it was the knowledge that God had sent him that was balm to my heart. My prayer was answered."

At these words Mrs. Masham involuntarily started.

"Yes, I recollect," she said slowly, looking at Mr. Barker.

"And if you pray, ma'am, your prayer also will be answered," added the clerk.

"Then you really are convinced of Mr. Masham's innocence?"

"I am convinced of it," replied Mr. Barker earnestly. "Listen, ma'am. God's ways are not man's ways. It is terrible that an innocent man should suffer. Only be sure that God never does anything unwisely. Yes, we must be sure of that. Oh, ma'am, one must cling on to that."

Mrs. Masham was still regarding him intently.

"And so God sent Mr. Masham to you when your wife died," she mused.

"He did, ma'am."

"And now He has sent Mr. Masham to prison."

Mr. Barker did not answer at once. Again he felt the awful cloud of doubt upon his heart.

"Perhaps it was the Evil One," he whispered at length.

"Yes, perhaps it was," conceded Mrs. Masham.

"That's a way out of it. Ah, what a Father! All

The Two Dependants

the same, when you pray, pray for me too, Mr. Barker."

Mr. Barker bowed. He felt very uncomfortable.

"Do you know, Mr. Barker," her voice pursued him relentlessly, "your argument seems to me to amount to this, that every evil is balanced by some sort of a good. God sends Mr. Masham to comfort you in your grief and then he sends him to prison so that you may comfort me in mine. It's a simple explanation, only isn't it rather jesuistical — evil that good may come of it? I've heard that in Russia people commit crimes just to experience the joy of repentance. But where does that sort of reasoning land one? Can you tell me that? Besides, I ask you, is the balance a fair one?"

"The Devil is always prowling about, ma'am," muttered Mr. Barker with most unusual irrelevancy. He was bewildered by the turn of the conversation (which seemed to find a vile echo in his own heart) and he stood there helpless before her, feebly rubbing his hands.

"Yes, he never stops prowling and prowling," he muttered again.

Mrs. Masham could hardly keep herself from laughing outright — he looked so exactly as if he were just going to produce a pen from behind his ear. "So this is Hubert's clerk, is it?" she thought, staring at him with interest.

The Echo of Voices

The discussion had languished very suddenly. The reflection of the lamp, widening in the dark, seemed to enclose them both, as though they had come there to listen and not to talk.

"Did my husband give you any messages for me?" she enquired after a pause.

"He did, ma'am." Mr. Barker delivered them awkwardly.

"I see. Well, when can you come and talk to me about his affairs, Mr. Barker? Can you come on Saturday?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"About five in the afternoon?"

"Yes, about five in the afternoon," repeated Mr. Barker.

He was turning to go when Mrs. Masham asked quietly, "Did he give you the watch and chain, Mr. Barker?"

"Indeed, ma'am, indeed he did. Here they are in my pocket. And you, ma'am — and that wreath you sent — I have not deserved anything like this."

Mrs. Masham smiled.

"You forget that you are our friend," she murmured.

After he had left the house, Mrs. Masham remained for a long time sitting motionless in her chair by the open window. She felt a delicious fatigue in

The Two Dependants

all her limbs and, slowly stretching herself, her supple body seemed to tingle from end to end. The whispers of the night, floating mysteriously into the room, filled her with a vague, happy unrest. From time to time half-formed pleasurable ideas seemed to rise like bubbles to the surface of her brain. She made no attempt to analyse them. A glowing, languorous sensation had possession of her and she yielded herself completely to it. At midnight her maid ventured to come into the room to ask her whether she would not go to bed.

"Yes, I suppose so," said Mrs. Masham in a resigned voice.

She allowed her maid to undress her without uttering a word. But after she had left the room Mrs. Masham did not immediately get into bed. Sitting before her mirror she continued to gaze pensively at her own image. She had wrapped a sky-blue dressing-gown over her white night-dress and with her hair gracefully arranged for the night, the powder lying still upon her cheeks, she looked younger, more blooming, more bewitching than a woman of twenty-five. Her head was poised lightly upon her left hand, she breathed as easily and softly as a cat dozing upon the hearthrug. A sense of well-being, growing deeper with the advance of sleepiness, made her sigh with content. In the mirror opposite she saw the reflection of her charming features, of her

The Echo of Voices

eyes, especially, with the long lashes that had been so much admired and she noticed that the reflection was smiling at her as though in pleasure. Mrs. Masham did not know that she had smiled. "And he is in prison to-night," she thought all at once. Somehow it did not worry her very much. "He must have been at it for a long time," she continued critically. "Well, I wonder if it will change him." She began to think of her married life. It had not been particularly successful. On the other hand it had been exactly what she always thought it would be. It had not disappointed her. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Masham had married "above her." Her origin was obscure. She did not herself know whether she had been born in Liverpool or Sydney. She had had an unfortunate affair in Australia when she was twenty and had come over to England with the idea of cutting herself quite adrift from her family, whose attitude towards their erring daughter struck her as merely absurd. She had not heard from them from that day to this and if she had she would not have answered. She had not gone "on the streets," which had been her first intention, because she had speedily realised that there was no future in that. Instead, she had become a waitress in some fashionable City tea-rooms. The life suited her. She had quickly developed the arts that appear necessary for this employment, the haughty yet familiar air, the

The Two Dependants

over-exaggerated lady-like voice, the enticing way of showing rather more than the ankle by a mere flick of the skirt. She had had innumerable trips up the River at other people's expense and she was very well acquainted with Brighton. Yes, the life suited her, but it did not satisfy all her ambition. At the age of twenty-six she had determined to marry. She could have done so several times before because, besides being very good-looking, she had always retained that outward air of reserve and decorum which quite fascinates sensuous young men. But it was not until she met Mr. Masham that she could make up her mind. Like many loose-minded women she had certain curious ideals of a half-formed and dreamy nature. Unknown to any one but herself, one of the chief things that had decided her to become a waitress at the tea-rooms was the thought that she could lie in bed every morning, doing nothing, hardly thinking indeed, but just letting her thoughts roam at will through the voluptuously romantic fancies of her brain. For some reason or other Mr. Masham had appealed to these fancies. Besides, she had ascertained that he was well-off. He was then at the very beginning of his great career and used to come into the tea-rooms every afternoon breathing success and geniality at every pore. She had set herself to catch him and it had proved easy. Her devices were familiar and Mr.

The Echo of Voices

Masham had capitulated at once. In a fortnight he was at her feet.

"And I will not have to do any house-keeping at all?" she had insisted, looking at him tenderly.

"Of course not. You can do exactly what you like," had exclaimed the enraptured Mr. Masham, "you can lie in bed the whole time if you like."

Before his future wife's gaze the real world seemed to be opening at last. She had shut her eyes to conceal from him a look of triumph.

"And let us live somewhere quiet, where we can have a garden," she had begun again, "where we can hear the bees early in the morning."

"Wherever you want, my darling," had answered Mr. Masham, embracing her.

And so everything was settled according to her wishes. She had never been near the City since. Mr. Masham's passion for her had lasted fully a year, and because of her discretion, her good-nature, and her fine appearance he still retained an affection for her. She knew beforehand that it would be like this. She knew also that her own feeling would not be permanent. But fortunately they had not got on each other's nerves. She allowed him to go his own way. His infidelities did not worry her in the least. (It is not *roués* that women are frightened of, but idealists.) She was sure of her position. She was wise enough to make no mistakes. And with-

The Two Dependants

drawing herself, as it were, from the world, she fell back more and more upon the vague, voluptuous fancies of her mind. In her long dreams, lasting from day to day, from year to year, she awaited something — something thrilling beyond words. She was not impatient. The whispers were far-off, low, vibrating within her soul. Moreover, she was rich. She had attended to that. She had made him settle money on her. She had always foreseen the possibility of catastrophe, and he, too, had always foreseen it and had been only too glad to settle the money. It was a large sum, the outcome of an almost legitimate speculation in Arizona copper, and it was invested in the surest of four per cents. The very house belonged to her.

Yes, she was safe. Was it this thought, perhaps, that made her smile as she sat before her mirror, or was it some other thought, unformed, light as the air, strangely alluring? She did not ask herself. She was getting sleepier every second. She felt utterly at peace with the world. The shock of her husband's conviction had, in fact, but ruffled the surface of her life for an instant. As for the social stigma, that did not worry her at all. She had not been reared in those circles and in her heart such things meant nothing to her. Their friends were people like themselves, men with flashy wives, bridge players and motorists, the hopeless, unmagnanimous drones of

The Echo of Voices

the new-rich. She did not care a bit whether she ever saw any of them again. "I shall lie in bed all day to-morrow," she thought luxuriously. She rose, divested herself of her dressing-gown, and after standing for a minute looking down at her feet, she climbed into bed and switched off the light. "Yes, all day long," she thought again, smiling in the darkness. . . .

It is a long way from Hampstead to Balham, but after his conversation with Mrs. Masham Mr. Barker had walked home the whole distance. He walked quickly, observing nothing, reflecting gloomily as he went. His interview with Mrs. Masham had only deepened the cloud upon his mind. "Withdraw not the light of Thy countenance," he whispered all at once. A net of irreconcilable questions seemed to open before him. God — the Devil — Divine Goodness! He thought of his late master and of what he was suffering at that moment. It filled him with anguish. His grief expressed itself in the forbidding and stern expression of his face. He did not think of himself, of his bleak future, he did not even think of his five children, but he prayed that the frown of God might pass away from "Thy servant Hubert Percival Masham." He was single-minded, without guile, and the complex nature of human affairs had never presented itself to him before this day. He had no resource but in prayer (couched in strictly

The Two Dependants

Biblical language) for his sorrows and for his doubts. Of Mrs. Masham he did not think at all.

When he reached home he found everything in darkness. The widow of the fishmonger who, for a small weekly sum, had been in daily attendance since the death of his wife had already retired to her lodgings across the way. He was alone in the house, because a few days before his sister had appeared and carried off his children to her husband's farm for their annual holiday. Groping his way through the passage Mr. Barker descended the iron steps that led into his little garden. Even there, in the shabby patch surrounded by back-yards and the blank walls of houses, the cool fragrance of the hour had penetrated with its exquisite stillness. The cries of a remote street-market came muffled upon the ear just as night itself had softened all the squalor of the scene into some magic labyrinth or terraced wilderness. And upon Mr. Barker's heart, too, a stillness had begun to fall, sweet and strange out of the past. He stood for a long time looking up at the sky. Tenderly floated the unbidden memories about him like passionate, faint whispers of dead lips. Suddenly he trembled as though he had seen a ghost and, all the spell about him shattering without a sound, he went, very cold, lonely, and despairing, back into the house. Before going to bed he prayed for half an hour.

The Echo of Voices

By instinct and of necessity Mr. Barker was an industrious man. But with Mr. Masham's conviction a great lassitude seemed to have taken hold of him. When he awoke next morning his first thought was this, "I must get hold of some work." But, as a matter of fact, he made no efforts in that direction. He spent all the day digging in the back-garden. And even when the next day came he could decide on nothing. He dreaded his second interview with Mrs. Masham. Without knowing it himself he had become terrified at the idea of religious encounters. But, as the hour approached, he dressed himself as though he were going to Chapel and started forth.

He found Mrs. Masham sitting in her favourite window-seat. She was all in black. Her face was composed but the gesture with which she greeted Mr. Barker and beckoned him to a chair was languid as with grief and the exhaustion of sleepless nights.

"I have a lot to talk to you about, Mr. Barker, but I am weary,"

Mr. Barker looked at her with solicitude.

"I can see no light anywhere."

"Providence is inscrutable, ma'am," replied the calvanistic Mr. Barker.

"Is that only one way of saying it's blind? Why should the innocent suffer with the guilty?"

The Two Dependants

This was precisely the question Mr. Barker had been asking himself during the last two days.

He knit his brows.

"You forget the Devil, ma'am," he answered severely.

"No, I remember all you said. But I am not sure that I understand you. Listen, Mr. Barker — who rules the world, God or the Devil?"

"God," responded Mr. Barker.

"Then God can be the Devil but the Devil can't be God. No, don't stare at me like that, Mr. Barker. I daresay I put it wrongly. Perhaps this is better — if there is a Devil it was God who made him, because He is accountable for everything. Do you agree to that?"

"Go on, ma'am," muttered Mr. Barker desperately.

"Why, what more is there to say? God has only to speak the word and there would be no more wickedness, no more suffering, and no more doubt. All would be as it was in the first days of the Garden of Eden, and, made perfect as Angels, we should praise Him unceasingly with loud shouts of Hosanna in the Highest. That is the picture; and yet you — you who believe it is all possible — try to excuse God for making the world as it really is."

"I believe also in Original Sin," said Mr. Barker unsteadily.

The Echo of Voices

"What, something that God has no power over?"

"Certainly not, ma'am. God has power over everything."

"Then how do you account for Original Sin?"

"It is born in man," said Mr. Barker with conviction.

"Yes, but why should it be if God is all powerful?"

"Because man is vile."

"Yes, yes, but who created man vile? God, of course. Therefore it's God who is to blame."

"No, ma'am, God is not to blame. Man fell and God punished him. Do not take God's name in vain."

Mrs. Masham did not try to continue the argument but after a pause she remarked, "All the same, it was unjust to punish an innocent man."

"There is still the life to come," insisted Mr. Barker. "That's where everything will be made plain to us." He looked at Mrs. Masham. "And sighing and sorrow shall be no more," he added gently.

Mrs. Masham cast down her eyes. "And if all this is true, Mr. Barker," she replied very softly, "do you think it likely that it will comfort Mr. Masham in his cell as completely as it comforts us here?" She did not wait for a response but added immediately, "Don't be angry with me. You know,

The Two Dependants

I speak to you like this because I trust you. It is a comfort for me to speak, and I need comfort. Make allowances for me, Mr. Barker."

"My powers of comfort are very poor, ma'am," said the clerk.

He felt unable to speak, unable to mention the word "prayer."

"I am thinking of my husband, Mr. Barker. Ah, what suffering! Where is your God of mercy now?"

"His face is hidden from us, ma'am," rejoined Mr. Barker hopelessly.

"A God of Mercy hides His face from His own children? No, no, that won't do! It's not a God at all, it's a Devil. There's no such person as God. It's all a delusion, a delusion, Mr. Barker, a myth."

Mr. Barker reeled.

"Don't —" he murmured.

Mrs. Masham seemed to be peering into his eyes.

"Don't, please don't blaspheme, ma'am," he stammered, and he put out his hand as though to ward off an evil apparition.

"Well, I leave you with your just and merciful God," she said contemptuously, and she got up and went out of the door.

Mr. Barker remained standing in the middle of the room like a man under a spell. Through the

The Echo of Voices

open French windows a bar of light streamed across the carpet, enveloped his head in a cloud of dancing motes carrying with it the scent of the bright summer. But he did not move. All his features were contracted as in pain. And alone, very still, like an outworn statue, he seemed to ponder the solution of the Universe. After a long time he sighed, looked round him timorously, and taking up his hat went slowly out of the house. . . .

In the middle of the week Mr. Barker received a letter from Mrs. Masham asking him to come and see her on the following Saturday. It gave him no emotion of any kind. His despondency had thrown a kind of mechanical film over all his actions and thoughts. He did not even answer the letter. He knew that he would have to go.

He found Mrs. Masham sitting in the garden. She received him with a smile.

"I asked you to come, Mr. Barker," she began in a subdued voice, "because I don't wish you to carry away a wrong impression of me. I am easily upset nowadays. I have been through a great deal." She paused a moment and continued in a more natural tone, "And then we never did discuss business after all, did we? And there's one more thing — what about yourself, Mr. Barker?"

"About myself?" echoed the clerk.

"Yes, about yourself. I have been thinking of

The Two Dependants

you. You don't look well. And have you got any work yet?"

Mr. Barker shook his head.

"Ah, that's what I've been fearing, that's exactly what I've been fearing," came like a pistol-shot from Mrs. Masham.

Mr. Barker shook his head.

"Why, ma'am, its nothing," he expostulated. "Clerks are always getting out of work. I've often been out of work before. You don't understand."

Mrs. Masham leaned confidentially forward.

"Perhaps I understand better than you do yourself," she murmured. "You are too humble to realise that no one can do more than sacrifice all they have for another. But I realise it. Don't you remember that sentence in the Bible, 'Greater love hath no man than that he lay down his life for his friend'? It was written for the humble, Mr. Barker. They never think it refers to them, but it does. I know all about the Bible. I've had plenty of time for reading. Shall I tell you what Christianity is? — it's a religion for the humble. That's why you can appreciate it and I can't, and that's why you can get consolation out of this God of yours."

"My God, ma'am? He is as much your God as my God."

"No, Mr. Barker, He is not my God. I don't want a God like that. I don't believe He exists."

The Echo of Voices

Mr. Barker was silent.

"And what makes you believe He exists?" added Mrs. Masham.

"Faith," muttered the clerk.

"Ah, faith! The faith which makes Hindus believe in their God, and Mohammedans in theirs, and savages in idols — is that it, Mr. Barker? Isn't their belief founded on faith?"

"No, ma'am, on superstition."

"Really — well, you ask a Mohammedan what he thinks your religion is founded on."

"Mohammedans are no better than infidels, ma'am," retorted Mr. Barker severely, "even many so-called Christians —"

He stopped in embarrassment.

"I agree with you, Mr. Barker. But are you quite certain that you are not also an idolater?"

"I don't know what you mean, ma'am," said Mr. Barker with an effort.

"Why, just what I say, of course. But tell me this, Mr. Barker; even if it is all true, even if everything is just as you believe, what do you Christians really know about the Devil? You, yourself, you're always talking about him, but what do you *know*? That's what I should like to find out."

"We know this about him, ma'am, that he is the author of evil."

"Well, but is he? Suppose you have all been

The Two Dependants

mistaken. Suppose it is actually the Devil who is good and God who is wicked." She laughed outright at his air of shocked bewilderment. "Perhaps you think I'm just saying this to tease you, but indeed I'm not. No, Mr. Barker. But answer me this, isn't there far more unhappiness in the world than happiness? Of course there is. Every one knows that. Now, if God was really good would He have allowed such a thing? It's a simple question, so please don't put me off with the life to come. I'm tired of the very name. It's utterly uninteresting to me. It's just as if you said, 'Let me kill you at once so that you can enjoy all the longer rest in that beautiful oak coffin with brass handles which I saw at the undertaker's.' But seriously, Mr. Barker, don't you think it's very unfair that we never hear what the Devil has to say for himself? We get nothing but the other side of the case. The Devil simply hasn't a look in. How do we know he's as bad as he's painted? He may be very well meaning, only stupid like any ordinary bishop. I'm sorry for the Bible Devil, he's such an awful bungler. He's everlastingly making a fool of himself. How God must laugh at him—just think, he's probably laughing at him now like anything. As for being powerful, that's got nothing to do with cleverness. It's only an accident, like having six fingers instead of five. Gods don't create themselves, you know,

The Echo of Voices

Mr. Barker, otherwise they can't always have existed and if they didn't always exist then what was there before? "

The perspiration stood on Mr. Barker's forehead.

"I cannot argue with you, ma'am," he said harshly, "you have not even the faith of a grain of mustard seed."

Mrs. Marsham laughed.

"What, more quotations, Mr. Barker? "

"My brain is bewildered, ma'am, I can't think properly," muttered the other.

But Mrs. Masham, rising to her feet, seemed to throw from off her the veil of mockery.

"I accept your rebuke," she said quietly. "It's my abominable selfishness. I'm in an overstrung condition, Mr. Barker. Forget all my stupid nonsense. And now let us talk about yourself."

"Why, ma'am? There is nothing to say."

"Excuse me, Mr. Barker, there is a great deal to say. There is, for instance, the question of your getting employment."

Mr. Barker was silent.

"Then there is the question of your helping me with Mr. Masham's affairs. I have a proposal to make to you, Mr. Barker. You admit that you are out of work. Then will you let me be your employer for a few weeks? Will you let me put aside for you a room where you can work every day? "

The Two Dependants

"Is it really necessary, ma'am?" responded Mr. Barker tonelessly.

"It is necessary. It's the only way we have of helping Mr. Masham. Remember what you promised us both. And, once more, forgive me for all my foolish words. I have suffered too much. I am in such revolt against Providence. All my heart is torn."

She had assumed in a moment a tragic and care-worn appearance.

"All right, I will come," said Mr. Barker.

She gave him a look of gratitude.

"I was sure you would. And now we had better say good-bye. We are both upset. I shall expect you, then, on Monday at ten o'clock."

Mr. Barker bowed to her, turned, and walked with long strides out of the garden.

"He flounders easily," she mused, watching him, while all through her body there passed a thrill of pleasant excitement. . . .

Mr. Barker did not sleep well, although he had gone straight up to his room when he reached home. He rose early and after he had made himself a cup of tea he took his Bible and went out into the back-garden. It had been his custom to do this on fine Sunday mornings for many years. But to-day he did not attempt to open the Bible. He just sat there with it on his knees. It did not even occur

The Echo of Voices

to him later to get up and make himself ready for Chapel. In the drowsy, warm sunlight his head suddenly nodded forward upon his chest. He started, opened his eyes very wide, and then let them slowly close. At the same instant he was asleep.

He was awakened by the sound of steps. Turning, he saw, framed in the doorway, the figure of Mr. Pascoe, chief Deacon of his Balham Chapel.

"The Service!" thought Mr. Barker in a flash. He had never missed it before.

Mr. Pascoe was a bearded, venerable man of about sixty-six, dressed all in black, with black gloves, a rusty black frock-coat, and shiny trousers. On his head he wore an old silk-hat surrounded by a mourning band.

"You were not with us this morning, Brother Barker," he began in a high, quavering voice. "Is there illness in your home? The Lord be with you."

"There is no illness," muttered Mr. Barker sheepishly.

Mr. Pascoe looked mortified.

"Then shall we see you to-night?" he asked in an inquisitorial voice.

"Probably not," said Mr. Barker.

Mr. Pascoe turned up his eyes as though calling upon Heaven to witness the backsliding of one of the elect, but he made no reply beyond a sort of groan. He sat down beside Mr. Barker and taking out his

The Two Dependants

handkerchief he carefully rubbed the inside of his hat.

"You have been in sore affliction, my brother?" he ventured.

"Yes, great affliction."

"God's will be done," said Mr. Pascoe fervently. "I see that you have His Book in your hand. Ah, what a Book it is! In my grief, also, it has proved a blessing. Where should I be now without it?"

"Why, what is the matter?" enquired Mr. Barker.

His aged friend looked very uncomfortable.

"The matter? — oh, Brother Barker, I have been through the most terrible trouble. All my savings —"

He stopped to wipe the rheum from his eyes.

"Everything has gone," he declared tearfully.

Mr. Barker was too dumfounded to speak. But after a minute's silence he asked, "Do you find much comfort in prayer, Mr. Pascoe?"

"Yes, yes, but just think what it means, brother. Every penny I had put by for my old age, every penny. There's nothing left."

"But does not prayer help you to bear it?" insisted Mr. Barker.

Mr. Pascoe was weakly offended at this remark.

"Why do you speak to me like this?" he said, trembling all over. "You are turning into a godless

The Echo of Voices

man. If any one should sympathise with me it is you, you Brother Barker. Isn't it to you I owe all my misfortune? If it hadn't been for you I should still have had my £200." He could not restrain his tears. "You are to blame," he whimpered.

"I am to blame!" articulated the astounded Mr. Barker.

"Yes, it is all true. Didn't I put my trust in you? How was I to know your Mr. Masham was a swindler?"

Mr. Barker was horrified.

"You invested your money with Mr. Masham?" he shouted incredulously.

"All I had — my £200. Didn't you tell me once that he was the best man you knew?"

"He both was and is," said Mr. Barker sternly. "How was it you came to lose your money? How was it I knew nothing about it?"

Mr. Pascoe clutched his arm.

"It was like this. I was going to put my £200 into an annuity. I'd been thinking of it for years, and the longer you wait the more you get. Hadn't I a right to do it? Hadn't I made it all myself? Oh, my brother, it was the very sweat of my brow! But my nephew — you don't know him — he's crafty. 'And where should I be then?' he thinks. What wickedness there is in man! He keeps saying to me, 'Look, uncle, look at this prospectus.' How he

The Two Dependants

hinted and hinted! I got so tired with his talk that I took it from him at last. And there, at the very top, was the name of that Masham of yours, that brand fit for the burning. But what could I do? Hadn't you praised him to me as a very saint? What could I do, I say?"

He relapsed back into senile tears, which Mr. Barker, who felt physically stunned, made no effort to assuage.

"And now you speak harshly to me," he blubbered. "Where is your religion? Oh, that I should have lived to see this day!"

"You ought to have consulted me," muttered Mr. Barker. "I knew nothing of all this. Did you do it in your nephew's name?"

"Yes, in my nephew's name," whispered Mr. Pascoe eagerly, as though in this question he perceived a ray of hope, "altogether in his name. Brother Barker, you will help me, won't you?"

Mr. Barker looked with commiseration at the old man, in whose appearance respectable and secret poverty was marked only too clearly.

"If I can do anything I will," he said haltingly, without encouragement.

Frail and shaky, Mr. Pascoe got to his feet. "God will reward you," he mumbled in his beard.

Mr. Barker did not reply. He had no hope of divine rewards. He accompanied Mr. Pascoe to the

The Echo of Voices

street without a word. But when he returned to the garden he began to walk to and fro in frantic distress. The whole world seemed to be falling to pieces in a cloud of evil. The godly and the innocent were victims on every side. Wherever you looked wickedness and misery reigned triumphant. And prayer was useless — that was the most awful thought of all. The one pathway to salvation was closed. Or was salvation itself a dream, a delusion? Disintegrating echoes of Mrs. Masham's conversations seemed to creep and creep through his brain. He went into the house, ate a few mouthfuls of food, and started out to walk to Hampstead.

Mrs. Masham expressed no surprise at seeing him. She was in a gentle mood and he, too, remembering how she had appealed to him only yesterday, spoke gently to her, stifling the agony of his heart, striving to soften the unconciliating rectitude of his manner. He told her simply, in few words, the story of Mr. Pascoe's loss, and glancing at him she knew at once that it had not, by so much as a hair's breadth, changed his opinion of her husband.

Mrs. Masham appeared to ruminate. "Yes, he is dense," she was thinking. After a decent interval she remarked, "It is very sad, Mr. Barker. What would Mr. Masham say if he knew? How he loved the poor — and the rich. How he loved everybody. Did you say this Mr. Pascoe had lost much?"

The Two Dependants

"Two hundred pounds — the savings of his lifetime."

"And he is an old friend of yours?"

"Yes, ma'am, my oldest friend."

"All right. I will make it good to him."

Mr. Barker jumped up with a cry, to meet the brilliant, shining eyes of the beautiful Mrs. Masham fixed upon him.

"Benefactress!" he stammered in confusion.

Never before had he experienced such a hidden and inconceivable emotion of guilt.

"You shall have it to-morrow," said Mrs. Masham.

He tried to thank her suitably, but all he said sounded unreal and stilted. Presently he got up to go.

"You remember what you promised me?" said Mrs. Masham, rising at the same time.

"About my coming to-morrow?"

Mrs. Masham smiled.

"Yes, my friend, that's what I mean. But why are you trying to run away so early? You have never really seen my garden yet. Will you walk round it with me?"

Mr. Barker bowed. He could not have expressed, even to himself, the bewildered shame of his heart. He felt that he must talk about Mr. Masham.

"When you write to your husband, ma'am," he

The Echo of Voices

muttered, "be sure to tell him what you have done. It will give him great happiness."

"Will it?" said Mrs. Masham; then added briskly, "Come, Mr. Barker, you are not looking at my garden."

The heat radiated from the high red walls. They walked along the paths and, going through a door in the wall, found themselves on the green slopes of a lawn overlooking a little pond. All was peaceful as the quiet of a dell in the midst of a pine-wood.

"Do you know, Mr. Barker," said his companion all at once, "I think there is something very touching about your faith in Mr. Masham."

"Why so, ma'am?"

"Oh, I don't know; I just think there is."

Mr. Barker was not the sort of person to notice grades of intonation, but he suddenly trembled.

"My faith in Mr. Masham is founded on facts," he replied.

"Well, it is very touching," reiterated Mrs. Masham.

Every minute of their walk had seemed more unbearable to Mr. Barker. He could not understand what was happening within him. He felt as if some insufferable guilt were penetrating into his soul. He would have seized any opportunity for departure.

Perhaps she realised this, because she remarked be-

The Two Dependants

fore long, "Well, I know you want to be getting home now," and held out her hand.

He took it, let it drop as if he had been stung, and went away without a word.

After he had gone Mrs. Masham settled down to one of her long evenings of rapturous immobility. All round her the scent of the garden, rising with the dew, seemed like an intoxicating rare perfume out of the East. The hours passed. The stars, coming out in the sky, began to shine like faint harbour lights across the sea. She was completely at rest.

"Yes," she thought suddenly, "as soon as his belief goes, then everything goes," and, jumping up, she went full of joy and gladness into the dark house.

On Monday morning at ten o'clock Mr. Barker arrived for his new duties. He was conducted to Mr. Masham's study where, with a pile of papers before him, he continued working all day. At five o'clock Mrs. Masham made her appearance and urged him to go home. She had a few minutes' conversation with him about what he had been doing and just as he was leaving handed him a bulky envelope. She did it quite simply.

"It contains the money," was all she said, adding immediately, "I shall expect you again to-morrow."

"Yes — very good — ten o'clock," mumbled Mr. Barker, too overcome to know how to answer.

He did not wait to go home, but hurried straight

The Echo of Voices

to Mr. Pascoe. The old man lived in two meagre rooms at the top of a flight of dark stone stairs and he could always be found there of an evening poring over sermons from the Free Library or knitting comforters on a wooden frame of his own invention. They were his only relaxations. He was reading when Mr. Barker knocked, trying painfully with the aid of horn spectacles to spell out comfort for his ancient and stricken heart. Mr. Barker explained what had happened and produced the envelope and gave it over. But the old man seemed unable to comprehend. He had no sooner torn it open than he was overwhelmed by the most violent trembling and great tears began to roll down his face. He crushed the notes in his hand and suddenly opening it he stared at them with amazement and ecstasy.

"But here they are! Where did you get them?" he stammered.

"I tell you, I got them from Mrs. Masham. They belong to you now."

Mr. Pascoe shut his eyes.

"The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want," he quavered. Then, "Where does this woman abide, Brother Barker?"

Mr. Barker gave him the address.

The old man was getting more excited every moment. "You mean to say you just went and told her everything and she gave you the money? O

The Two Dependants

Lord, my God, Thou art my Saviour! Ah, well, she knows it was my money. A poor wretch like me, too. Listen, Brother Barker, I shall put it in the Savings Bank. O Lord, Thou art indeed a help in time of trouble! Brother Barker, shall we pray? No, I must pray alone. My head seems to be going round. I was sitting here and then, before I know where I am, there's my £200 on the table. Brother Barker, you are absolved from a great sin. God will judge us all and me, too, and everybody. I was thinking, 'There's nothing but the workhouse now'—and, behold, you were already knocking at the door. How my heart beats! God will reward you."

He got up, shivering like a little child after a fright.

"Yes, God knows all our secrets," he whispered vaguely.

Mr. Barker hastened to bid him good-bye.

"Shall I take a message from you to Mrs. Masham?" he asked, as he was going out.

Mr. Pascoe looked at him.

"No, I will manage that," he answered slowly.

Mr. Barker did not see him again to speak to for some time. For now began for him several weeks of hard work. Alone in Mr. Masham's study he toiled ceaselessly from morning till night to bring order out of chaos in all that remained of his former master's papers and affairs. He had little enough to go

The Echo of Voices

upon. Everything in the slightest degree incriminating had been impounded long since. Still his perseverance had some slight measure of success. Moreover, he continued to draw up the first report ordered of him by Mr. Masham. During all this period he saw but little of the financier's wife. As a matter of fact, he avoided her. And she, on her side, was discretion itself. If she came into the study it was only to speak formally to him on business. She asked intelligent questions; she even initiated lines of research. And yet he knew that in their relationship there was something that had not been there before, something which her very reticence made all the more significant, something born, as it were, on that afternoon he had told her of Mr. Pascoe's ruin. How it haunted him, this horrible, this hidden understanding! He did not even know properly what it was. But suddenly, in the middle of the most impersonal conversation, their eyes would meet as though words were just going to be said that could never be unsaid again. Mrs. Masham would laugh and turn away, while Mr. Barker, biting his lips very hard, would begin striding up and down the room. She would be gone so softly that when he looked up he was alone. Mr. Barker would pass his hand over his face as though he had been dreaming. "I must do some work," he would mutter, "some more work," and he would sit down resolutely at the table. But some-

The Two Dependants

times after such a scene he could not work. He could only stare at the door like a man bewitched. He had to pull himself together with a jerk. Now and always he was assailed by the most awful of doubts, by the most terrible suggestions of evil. He could explain everything by phrases but he could not still his questioning heart. An argument went on within perpetually, an argument aching like the stab of conscience, forever traversing the same ground, forever confronted by the figure of the innocent Mr. Masham. It was a dual argument, in which a strange, forbidden horizon appeared to be emerging from above the withered shadow of belief. Mr. Barker dreaded human society. He seemed to live in a world of phantoms. Truly he was deafened by the eternal conflict of his doubts.

And Mrs. Masham, observing him from day to day, knew every step of the journey. She knew that to him she was no longer a mere factor in the problem of Mr. Masham. It made her glow all over as she sat amidst her darkening rose-bushes. More and more she felt at peace with all the world. Since the *débâcle* no one had visited her, and she was glad of it. She had never been so happy before. The hum of the advancing summer used to wake her every morning, and, lying with her eyes closed, she would let the very essence of it sink into her body, pulsating as with new life. She thought of Mr. Barker, as

The Echo of Voices

a painter thinks of the completed picture with the first dab upon the canvas. She had almost forgotten her husband. She felt no animosity towards him, no malice at all, but for a long time he had been fading out of her life and now his actual absence had completed the illusion. She was one of those women whose past has no hold on them. Her reveries were concerned with another kind of existence altogether, with half-material glimpses of sun-lit isles, with emotions of delight, with dreams of conquest, passion, and surrender. She could not have explained why it was that the incongruous Mr. Barker had become the pivot of her desires. She was not interested in explanations. They bored her. She took things as they happened. If they were good she accepted them; if they were bad she retired within herself, listening, as in a trance, for the footfall of the hours to come. Intrigue, alone, did not amuse her. She was too imaginative. Her sensuous nature was moored to the unsatisfied yearnings of romance. . . .

When, on the second Saturday after his instalment, Mrs. Masham entered the study to pay him his salary (she did this with great tact, leaving the money in an envelope as though she had dropped it on the desk by mistake), she found Mr. Barker staring out of the window with his hands behind his back.

"I have finished my work here, ma'am," he said, answering her look of enquiry.

The Two Dependants

"Then you are not coming again?"

"No, ma'am; everything is now in order; that's to say as far as it's possible for me to put it in order."

"I thank you from my heart," murmured Mrs. Masham. "But remember, Mr. Barker, it is only as an employer I am losing you. As a friend you are necessary to me."

"Of course — at your service," blurted Mr. Barker indistinctly.

"Well, I should think so indeed! What a strange man you are, Mr. Barker!"

"No, I am a very ordinary man," said Mr. Barker, not smiling in the least.

Mrs. Masham laughed more merrily than ever.

"Oh, but you are a strange man; you remind me of — what shall I call it? — a conspirator."

But Mr. Barker was not heeding.

"How often has Mr. Pascoe been here?" he asked suddenly.

She affected surprise.

"Mr. Pascoe? How did you know he had been here at all? I can't say how often — several times. He came to thank me and — well, he keeps on coming. We agree famously. I believe he's waiting to see me at the present moment."

"He is," said the direct Mr. Barker. "I saw him through the window five minutes ago. I'm always seeing him. I think he tries to avoid me."

The Echo of Voices

Mrs. Masham glanced at him.

"There may be a reason," she replied in a lower key.

But Mr. Barker did not like the conversation. He hated all this air of mystery and, most of all, he hated himself. He wished he had never mentioned the subject.

"I don't know what you mean," he retorted; "perhaps he still fancies he has a grievance against me. If that's so —" He shrugged his shoulders.

Mrs. Masham smiled but she did not enlighten him any further.

"Come and see me again soon," she remarked as he was leaving.

Mr. Barker went home in a curious frame of mind. He was abased to the very ground. He did not know where to turn. He felt that things needed straightening out and he did not dare to ask himself why. He was horribly anxious to see Mr. Pascoe. He resisted the desire for several days (during which he did positively nothing but walk up and down his garden), but one evening he suddenly took up his hat and went round to the old man's lodgings. He found him just finishing his supper, but, to tell the truth, Mr. Pascoe showed no pleasure at his visit.

"You are never at Chapel now, Brother Barker," he piped shrilly in answer to the other's greeting.

He did not wait for Mr. Barker to make any re-

The Two Dependants

sponse (what response was there?), but, jumping up, he began to clear the table with quite unnecessary noise.

"I wanted to ask you," said Mr. Barker, "how it is —" ("No, what am I saying?" he thought bitterly.) "You are very friendly with Mrs. Masham now, aren't you?" he added in a steady voice.

Mr. Pascoe looked slyly at him, but all at once redoubled his energy.

"What is it you're saying, Brother Barker? Oh, these plates, how they clatter and clatter! I wish I had never bought tin plates."

"Is it true that you often see Mrs. Masham?" insisted Mr. Barker.

"Well, I went to thank her. There, I've dropped it now! What were you asking? Do I see her often? I see her sometimes, of course. Oh, Brother Barker, what a godly, upright woman! Look how I've dented it! That's the way these tin plates always go. Lord, help me in my small trials!"

He stared ruefully at his friend.

"What has happened to you?" muttered Mr. Barker, more to himself than aloud.

But Mr. Pascoe, whose hearing seemed to have grown abnormally acute, took him up at once.

"What has happened to me? Glad tidings, Brother Barker, glad tidings. I have traversed verily the Valley of the Shadow. But God, in His

The Echo of Voices

mercy has remembered me. My heart is lifted up."

Mr. Barker frowned. Mr. Pascoe's piety appeared out of tune. Moreover, he felt quite sure that there was something else.

"You have altered a great deal," he remarked drily.

Mr. Pascoe went on buzzing about the room like a fly. But he heard everything.

"Altered, you say? No, no, it is not I who have altered, brother. You have altered. Oh, these cups! Yes, it is you who are different. You have become very godless. How the dust gets everywhere! I know I brushed this shelf only yesterday. Do you hear? — only yesterday I brushed every inch of it. You talk about change, Brother Barker. May God soften your heart."

Mr. Barker had had enough of it. He got up.

Mr. Pascoe was still running from corner to corner with his duster. It was quite evident that he had resolved not to hold any real conversation with the clerk. The whole thing was a mystery to Mr. Barker and nothing in it was more mysterious to him than the fact that it should appear so momentous. An old man in his dotage carried away by flattery and good fortune! Bah, it was absurd! But he did not cease thinking about it all night. His thoughts were confused. Only one thing he saw clearly and that

The Two Dependants

was that this state of affairs could not go on. There must be an end to it. Pacing in his garden in the morning twilight he made his resolution. As soon as the paper arrived he began eagerly to scan the vacant-situation pages. Having marked suitable ones with a blue pencil, he folded the sheet and went forth to try his luck. The final result of it was (and it took more than a week of trudging and re-buffs) that he got the offer of a post as book-keeper in some stores at a salary of £2.10. It was not brilliant but he accepted it at once. The very difference from his past employment would close the old chapter as nothing else could. And it needed closing tight, tight, so that no whisper of the other world could ever penetrate again.

Entering his little hall, on his return home from this successful expedition, the first thing he saw was a letter from Mrs. Masham. It was lying on the mat, just where the postman had shoved it through the door. The mere sight of it caused the blood to rush into Mr. Barker's face. He picked it up, opened it, and read that he was to call upon Mrs. Masham at once. "Now—this afternoon?" he thought breathlessly. He felt painfully excited, so excited indeed that he was almost light-headed. At the same time a formidable weight pressed upon his heart. He found himself running to the station. . . .

The Echo of Voices

The meeting was a singular one. Mrs. Masham opened the door to him herself as if she had been awaiting his arrival. She did not speak, but immediately stepped past him out of the house and beckoned him to follow her into the garden.

"You have been a long time coming to see me," she said at last, and her voice, low in the still afternoon, sounded very thrilling in Mr. Barker's ears.

"Yes, a long time. I have been trying to get work."

"And you have succeeded?"

Mr. Barker nodded. He could only articulate with difficulty and he noticed with terror that Mrs. Masham was trembling.

"Does that mean I shan't see you any more, Mr. Barker?"

Mr. Barker was silent. In spite of all his promises to Mrs. Masham that was exactly what it had meant. Their eyes suddenly met.

"I think it does, ma'am," he muttered hoarsely.

Mrs. Masham walked on a little way and stopped.

"It's intolerably hot here," she murmured. "Let us go down to the pond."

The heat was, indeed, terrific. In the last half hour a singular change had taken place. The sky had grown all leaden and was rapidly darkening towards the East. Stagnant air drooped upon the earth and quivered, parched and lifeless, over every

The Two Dependants

motionless twig and blade of grass. An unnatural hush lay heavily upon the garden. Everything seemed to portend a storm.

"Follow me," said Mrs. Masham.

Mr. Barker followed her. They went through the further gate leading onto the lawn. Neither of them spoke, hushed, perhaps, by the great warning hush of nature herself. In passing down the slope Mr. Barker happened to look at the house, only to catch a distinct and fleeting vision of Mr. Pascoe's aged face in an upper window. For some reason or other the sight irritated him intensely.

"I see that you still have that old man visiting you," he remarked.

"Yes, he comes nearly every day. He's here now. I — I didn't expect you so early."

Mr. Barker laughed, but it was not a very agreeable laugh.

"Really, ma'am, I see no reason why we shouldn't meet. There's no mystery, is there?"

"Perhaps not. Only he seems frightened of you. And, who knows, you mightn't like to hear the truth about his visits."

"Not like to hear the truth! On the contrary, that's precisely what I should like to hear. Tell me the truth, ma'am."

He spoke bitterly.

"All right. Only don't be angry. The explana-

The Echo of Voices

tion may strike you as rather sordid. He comes here to — to get more money. He's very persistent. He's always at it. I suppose he thinks I'm a fool. In a word, he's trying to sponge on me."

Mr. Barker gazed at her with open-mouthed dismay.

"What, you gave him all that money and that's his answer! Mr. Pascoe sponging and begging! How detestable! Mr. Pascoe of all men!"

Mrs. Masham pouted.

"Oh, that's nothing. You know, I never did believe in these religious old men. I don't give it a second thought."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" demanded Mr. Barker.

"Because — well, can't you guess why?" and she threw on him a glance so shy and burning that he shuddered. "I wanted you to be jealous, if only of an old man," she breathed.

Mr. Barker did not move or speak. Something like blissful and poisonous honey seemed to seethe in his blood.

"I am not acting now," she whispered softly and timidly.

It was quite true. She was not acting. She had never felt like this before in all her life. She did not know what had happened to her. She would have given all she possessed to hear that he loved her. She

The Two Dependants

had waited years for this moment and now, at last, it was as if she could wait no longer.

Thus does woman's hatred of the abstract make of romance itself only a form of patient discontent until some Mr. Barker, at first merely exciting as a contrast, shall have swept her past her conscious goal in the sudden flood wrecking all the former boundaries of her desire.

"Oh, speak to me!" she murmured.

But Mr. Barker did not speak. His thoughts roared at him much too loudly. If there was no God, no hereafter, no righteousness in the world then why shouldn't he take her? If there was no good there could be no evil and every one must think only of themselves. Yes, why shouldn't he take her? She would be his, and all would be forgotten, and he would know that he had not lived in vain. All, all would be forgotten. One word only and then — forgetfulness!

Mrs. Masham, intent upon the moment, did not understand. She had lost suddenly all her knowledge of men. She only wanted to feel his arms round her. The blushes came and went on her face as on that of a young girl.

"Speak to me!" she murmured again.

Her words stilled the tumult in Mr. Barker's brain. What was the good of resisting! He opened his mouth to speak and at the same instant he remem-

The Echo of Voices

bered Mr. Masham. Yes, strange as it may appear, he had not thought of him before. Perhaps it was that he had long realised (without admitting it to himself) that her husband was nothing to Mrs. Masham. Well, and suppose that *was* the reason! Pretty reason, indeed! Vile reason! For in all the welter of his thoughts Mr. Masham alone stood firm upon the ground, a good man, just, innocent, his benefactor.

“Your — your husband?” muttered Mr. Barker desperately.

And as he spoke it seemed to him, wrought up as he was, that the spirit of the exuberant and burly Mr. Masham was filling the garden. Here he had walked on countless evenings, here his jovial shout had sounded in the dusk calling upon his wife to join him in his stroll. What memories! Nothing must be undone!

“Mrs. Masham, what is to happen to *him*?”

She made a gesture of weariness.

“Never mind him — it’s you, you!”

He heard her, and at her words the ghost of Mr. Masham’s presence vanished from the garden as though his corporeal master had, in very truth, never existed. Quick boiled once more the sweet poison in Mr. Barker’s veins. Again the shouts in his head, but shouts of triumph, of certitude, and of accomplished victory. In the anarchy of a world without

The Two Dependants

purpose there could only be yourself to think of, only your own happiness and delight! Look to yourself, Mr. Masham!

She was so blind as not to read him even then. She thought that, after all, he might yet slip from her.

“What has my husband got to do with it?” she asked him passionately. “Don’t you know that I hate him — that I have always hated him? You drive me mad with your chatter about his innocence. Simpleton! He’s guilty, guilty — do you hear? — guilty as he can be! He’s a common swindler! He’s been swindling for years. He’s a scoundrel, a defrauder of widows, a man who would do anything for money!”

Above their heads the first clap of the thunder-storm broke with a loud report and a few drops of rain, large and viscid, fell and spattered over the pond like grease.

Mr. Barker noticed nothing. He was staring at Mrs. Masham. He never doubted her words for a moment.

“Then, O God, Thou dost truly exist,” he cried all at once; “Thou art just and righteous and Thy vengeance is upon the oppressor!”

Mrs. Masham looked at him with eager, unseeing eyes.

“I tell you he’s guilty; my husband, Masham, is

The Echo of Voices

guilty. Oh, my beloved, forget him and come to me!"

She tried to hold his arm but he shook her off with horror.

"Begone, woman of Belial!" he shouted with frenzy. "God exists — repent while there is yet time! I, too, will repent in sackcloth and ashes! O God, here on this spot I confess my mortal sin! I implore thy pardon, and for him too, and for this woman."

He turned and rushed from her, and the second clap of thunder, breaking with a still louder explosion, drowned the cry of the woman he had left. The rain swept down in torrents but he did not feel it. God existed! So wildly did he run that he nearly collided with a boy on a red bicycle who was bringing a telegram to Mrs. Masham from the governor of the jail informing her that her husband had died that very morning from an attack of heart-failure.

MIDNIGHT



MIDNIGHT

THE last strokes of midnight had hardly ceased striking, loud or faint, from the City Churches like echo upon echo of one enormous chime, when Hazell, who had been writing steadily at his desk, suddenly heard a knocking upon his outer door. In the deep stillness succeeding the momentary clamour, the little clock on the mantelpiece, as though caught in an act of unpardonable sloth, began to count twelve with guilty and feverish haste.

“Midnight!” said Hazell to himself in astonishment.

Whoever it was who had knocked must have come upstairs as quietly as a mouse and be waiting out there now ready to knock again.

“Who can it be?” muttered Hazell, rising from his chair.

At that instant it sounded again, the knocking, more insistent and prolonged than before.

“Damnation!” he exclaimed, and without more ado he walked quickly into the passage and flung open the door.

A man whom he had never seen before, a very polite

The Echo of Voices

looking man of about twenty-eight, with a small moustache and dark hair, was standing on the mat. Hazell held the door open, pausing for him to say something or other. It suddenly struck him that his visitor was exactly like a clerk who has called by appointment to discuss some business or other, and he half expected him to introduce himself as such ("that little affair of the codicil, you remember," or so forth), and instinctively he glanced down to see if he were carrying the sort of seedy leather bag that lawyers' clerks always seem to carry—he was. There was something quite absurd in the incongruity of that bag. Hazell had actually an inclination to laugh, but it was checked by the dignified expression on the stranger's face. He stood before him with the collected air of a person deep in thought. Suddenly, without saying a word, he brushed past Hazell and entered the room. "What the Devil is this fellow up to?" thought Hazell, following him angrily. The man had gone over to the fire and was warming his hands with his back to him. It was as if he were awaiting the arrival of some one or other with whom he had business to transact. It was most insulting.

"Excuse me, what is it you want?" asked Hazell, leaning across the table.

The other turned and stared at him.

"What is it I want?—I want to know whether you recognise me?"

Midnight

"Certainly not. I've never set eyes on you before," snapped Hazell. He was thinking to himself, "Pooh, this is a very old game to play!"

"No, not set eyes on me," echoed the stranger distinct, weighing his words, "perhaps not that."

"For goodness' sake, explain yourself!" broke from Hazell, who was really losing his temper.

But the stranger only replied, in his even, dispassionate voice, "Look at me more carefully."

Hazell regarded him curiously. No, the man was a complete stranger to him. "Complete," he murmured with conviction. He gazed at him, standing so unexpectedly in the very room where all his creations had risen silently into life. He felt that he must fight against a sense of unreality that was beginning to creep over him. Who was this man watching him with such mysterious insistence?

"Sit down," he said at length.

The stranger sat down but he continued to look at Hazell in a very odd way — just as though they had some secret in common.

"I have been wanting to see you for a long time," he muttered.

He stopped, as if in confusion.

"I say, don't you recognise me?" he stammered all at once.

"No, I tell you I don't, if that's what you mean

The Echo of Voices

—but why are you shaking? What is it you want?”

Hazell said afterwards that he had begun to feel very excited. He saw that there was something wrong somewhere.

“Eh, what is it?” he repeated in a loud voice, thumping the table. “You don’t expect me to answer riddles, do you? Whoever heard of anything so ridiculous! Do you know what the time is? Twelve o’clock. Time I was in bed. Why do you call at such an hour, and who are you?”

The visitor placed his little bag upon the table.

“I’ve thought of coming to see you every day for five months,” he said, ignoring the question.

Hazell answered nothing at all, a faint and malicious smile suddenly passed over his face. He must have guessed how the other was going to begin.

“Do you remember that about a year ago you published a book?”

“Oh, perfectly, thanks,” observed the novelist in a dry tone.

He felt quite in his element. (“Rubbing my hands internally,” as he called it.) “This chap has something on his mind,” he thought. “Well, I published a book,” he added aloud in a mocking voice.

The stranger returned his glance without smiling. He seemed to waive aside Hazell’s irony.

“Listen,” he began severely. “In dreams one

Midnight

often has an eerie sensation of having experienced it all before. Just as certain faces, perhaps the faces of strangers, recall something familiar and yet elusive. And you know, too, what it is to be on the very point of falling asleep and to spring up with a wonderful light bursting in on you — a light flaring and going out at the same instant? Have patience — that's a sort of analogy. When I read your book I realised at once that if ever you were to meet me in a crowd you would only have to look at me to *understand*. Each time I read it I seemed to know you better, I seemed to see your eyes glued on me, I seemed to hear your voice telling me . . ."

"Mind what you say!" interrupted Hazell suddenly.

The stranger rose from his seat, slowly approached him and then slowly retraced his steps.

"In your book," he murmured, "you unbare the heart of a man who has committed a revolting crime — yes, just listen to what I say! — you don't gloss anything over, you don't make it romantic like some psychologists would, but you — you *explain*."

"What's this? — a confession?" Hazell cried out.

The stranger started.

"Confession! What do you mean? Who's talking about confession?" he shouted. And he began to laugh unsteadily. "A lot of nonsense! What have I got to confess? That's you novelists all over.

The Echo of Voices

Living in a perpetual crisis. Every one has to commit murders or something. I beg to be excused. I'm an ordinary person." He seemed very irritated.

Hazell smiled. He felt that something was coming out presently. "What's the good of all these lies?" he thought spitefully. All the same he understood.

"You didn't come here to tell me you were an ordinary person, I presume," he remarked.

The stranger frowned.

"Suppose I've got better stories in my head than any of yours," he murmured. "Suppose I've been thinking to myself, 'I wish I could see that fellow and give him some of my ideas.' Eh? Well, that's exactly the truth of the matter. Here am I brimful of ideas. I'm not a literary man — no, thank you — but I've got the ideas right enough. Here's one. Imagine that one night you were to arrive in London very late and were to get out at Waterloo Station. Imagine you had never been in London before. Well, out you get and you begin to look about for some place to sleep. You've only got a bag and very little money. So you walk here and there through all these streets of small houses. You don't really know where you are. By and by you see 'room to let' stuck up in a window. So you knock and a horrible old woman peeps out from above and asks what you want. You tell her you want the room and then

Midnight

she bangs the window to and you hear her calling out to some one inside. Steps keep going up and down. And just as you begin to think 'There's nothing to be got here,' she peeps out again and tries to get a good look at you. 'What about that room of yours?' you shout at her. 'Coming, coming, all in good time,' she calls back. Then slam goes the window again and more talk inside and steps still going up and down — a whole regiment of steps. At last down she comes and opens the door for you. Begins to spin a yarn about the sheets being changed or such like. You can't be bothered to listen to that sort of thing. All the house is dark and quite silent. Every one's gone except the old woman. 'This way, sir, this way to your room,' she croaks. You stumble up some beastly steps. 'Why the Devil don't you show a light?' you ask. She strikes a match. Ah, what a mean hole it is! 'Here's the room,' she says, 'I'll light a candle for you.' You look round. It's a big room, much bigger than you expected, and as bare as a board. Whitewash on the walls. And the old woman has melted away, gone before you can turn round. You listen at the door. 'Where the deuce have all these people got to?' you think, 'suppose they come creeping out again like rats.' . . ."

The stranger suddenly stopped.

"It's not much of a story after all," he observed in

The Echo of Voices

a detached voice. "Besides, I think I must have heard it somewhere. But suppose in that house, quite out of sight, in a nasty great box full of sawdust, there was lying the bent-up, warm, naked body of a man — bah, it's all very odious now that I think of it! I won't finish it. But here's another idea. Imagine that a respectable person is just going to bed in Russell Square one cold winter night when he hears a terrific knocking at his front door. The servants are asleep long ago. Down he runs, unfastens the door, and into the hall there staggers a man dripping wet, all his clothes oozing with water, his boots squelching over the Turkey carpet. An outrageous person. Both are speechless, one with astonishment, the other for lack of breath. The intruder is a man like a sailor — only not really like a sailor. He has a beard. And do you know what he wants the other man to do? He wants him to sew some bank notes into the lining of his coat. Of course the story's absurd because no one ever knows who he is or anything about him. That's the whole point. And then, just think, he makes the respectable householder take charge of a manuscript for him. And it appears afterwards that the manuscript is utterly unimportant (something about beetles in Yucatan, very amateurish) and has nothing to do with the story at all. Really, I don't know why one should bring it in. But, at any rate, sev-

Midnight

eral years later a letter comes from Australia demanding its return and saying nothing about anything else, and that's the end."

It was evident that the stranger was hardly listening to his own words.

"I say," he remarked all at once, as though a notion had just occurred to him, "do you ever have fearful dreams? I do. The other night I dreamed that I was gazing at the fire and suddenly, as I gazed, I could see that the whole affair was gently moving up and down like a person breathing. That's very extraordinary, I thought. So I looked closer and I saw that inside the fire, in the very centre of the coals, there was stuck the enormous white face of a pig — ah, you never saw anything so white! — and that it was breathing slowly and evenly and winking at me in the highest good humour. It just seemed to say, 'I get three hours all to myself every afternoon and I spend the whole of it drinking lemonade.' How disgustingly silly! I woke myself up double quick, I can tell you. But it's no good bothering about dreams. Only last night I dreamed that I was talking to Louis XIV, and it was very dull. He would hold forth on etiquette and 'le pauvre Roi d'Angleterre,' as he called him. I was frightfully bored. I wanted to hear something about his ladies. Finally, I could stand it no longer. 'Come, do dry up!' I bellowed. You would have laughed to see his

The Echo of Voices

expression. His eyes positively bulged. 'Excuse me, that's quite improper,' he mumbled, 'I must go and consult the Chef du Protocol.' At that I simply guffawed, because every one knows that the Chef du Protocol is an institution of the Third Republic. Fancy Louis XIV making such a howler! I was actually laughing when I woke up."

"I daresay you were," observed Hazell by way of saying something.

"Yes, I was laughing quite out loud. There were the tears running down my cheeks. It was the most preposterous thing."

Although the stranger spoke like this about his dream, the recollection of it did not really seem to amuse him. On the contrary, his face had grown more and more sombre. He suddenly looked keenly and, as it were, darkly at Hazell.

"That's all rot that I've been telling you," he muttered.

"Well, of course," assented Hazell politely and as though it were not a point worth discussing.

The other bit his lips.

"So much for dreams then," he conceded. "And as for short stories — Pooh! I daresay you think that any ass could go on plotting short stories forever. So they could. Don't you know what the Frenchman said about ideas? It's when you get to something big that the difficulty comes in. So just

Midnight

let me tell you that I've planned the whole scheme of a long novel. It's not easy to explain, but it's about a man in the tropics, entangled physically and mentally in a vast maze of lagoons. If you can understand, the story is like a sort of realistic *Lady of Shalott*. That's the great thing about it — it's absolutely realistic; and yet, in a way, it's not realistic at all. It'll be very lengthy. And every day, as he rows by himself far from land and gazes at his image reflected eternally in the water, gorgeous ideas flood his brain, washing slowly over it as the tide washes over the seaweed of the pools. You needn't laugh — it won't be a bit like *Robinson Crusoe*. And the lagoons stretch endlessly, for miles, right out to sea, divided by low coral ridges, a sort of mirror of lovely and poisonous calm. I assure you it will be the most realistic novel ever written. Do you find that hard to believe? You see, all I've told you is only a kind of background. The real story has to do with an escape. And, do you know, in spite of what I said before, I'm going to write this story myself one of these days. It'll be awfully thrilling. At any rate, I may write it. I can't say. Certainly no one else would be able to, for I'm sure I could never even explain my idea properly to any one else. Well, never mind."

He stopped abruptly. It seemed to Hazell that he had been making intense efforts all this time to

The Echo of Voices

keep off a subject close to his mind. He was obviously very uneasy.

"Look here," he began after a silence of nearly a minute, "what you novelists ought to do is to write idealistic stories. That's my real belief. For years I've been haunted by one scene. Imagine some great park in the South of England stretching round an old red-brick Tudor mansion. All is still. It's nearly ten o'clock on a June evening and it's getting quite dark. There's a sort of glow in the sky. And somewhere by the chestnut trees the owner of it all is walking with the girl he loves; and she loves him. They don't speak, they listen to the silence. And in the sky the last glow is fading away."

He made a gesture of despair.

"It strikes you as very commonplace, I daresay," he added presently, "but don't you realise the point? It's happiness I'm thinking of! Happiness!"

He rested his head in his hands.

"I don't know why it is I go on talking like this," he continued wearily. "I really came here to discuss your book with you. Yes, it was an extraordinary book. Sometimes as I read it I felt convinced that you must know all about me. I thought that if you were to see me you would immediately approach and say to me, 'Look, there is no crime, however abominable, that cannot be understood.' I went further — I persuaded myself that you were at that

Midnight

very instant on your way to me. I would close your book and listen for your footsteps without, for the ring of your bell. . . . And at last, I have sought you here. . . .”

“Hum, he’s a criminal, is he?” thought Hazell. His interest was rising from moment to moment.

“I — conceal nothing,” murmured the stranger as slowly as though the words were being hauled out of a well.

Hazell got up and immediately sat down again.

He told me that at that instant he would have given worlds for the man to have gone at once. His interest was all frozen within him.

“Let me advise you to be careful,” he murmured.

“Come, that’s enough! I’m sick of telling lies. Will you listen to me or not?” interrupted the stranger suddenly in a loud and unpleasant tone.

Hazell tried to smile but it was not very successful. He nodded his head.

They continued to regard one another for several minutes without a word being spoken. Between them, on the table, the bag appeared all at once, monstrous, sinister, filling the whole room.

“Why do you write about crime?” asked the stranger at length.

Hazell shrugged his shoulders.

“Why not?” he replied vaguely, “it’s interest-

The Echo of Voices

ing." He was not thinking of the question but of the questioner.

"Well, I'm going to tell you of a crime. But don't be misled beforehand. Nothing interesting there. It's in books that crime is interesting, only in books. Like disease. Crime and romance. . . ."

He looked at Hazell again.

"I — I am the man who —"

"Stop, no names!" exclaimed the novelist rapidly. "No names, I say! Tell it to me without names."

The stranger suddenly laughed, only to be immediately silent. His face had become extremely gloomy.

"It was jealousy," he said in a low voice. "A horrible story. Most horrible. By a lake — at night — do you remember?"

"You didn't —?" began Hazell.

"Yes."

The stranger got up from his seat, trembling all over.

"I strangled her," he added in a whisper.

Hazell, who felt very cold, cast a glance at the bag.

"These pigeons — you recollect? — I laughed at them," proceeded the other in a dazed voice; "laughed at them — it was just *before* — isn't that what madmen do?"

Midnight

He sank back in his chair, covering his face with both hands.

"Pigeons? — what pigeons are you talking about?" muttered Hazell. But after a minute he continued hurriedly, "If you had been in your right mind you would never have done this."

His visitor looked contemptuously at him.

"Don't you know better than that?" was all he said.

"Then why did you come here?"

"Why? Remorse — that's why! Agony, torture — isn't that enough? I don't want absolution, I want a reason, I want you to tell me, to tell me. . . ." His eyes were positively glaring. "You, who know about these things, tell me!"

Hazell did not reply.

"You don't say anything," supplemented the other, "but I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that there are innumerable shades of sanity, motive, self-consciousness, responsibility, and so on — you mean to trot them out for my benefit. You needn't! I know everything about that. Some people say that all crime is a disease and that therefore you cannot be responsible even though you know you are. What rubbish! Sophistry! Besides, pardon my saying it, but how can you be sure that I'm not concealing something from

The Echo of Voices

you all the time or tingeing what I tell you with some sort of a bias?"

"I can't be sure — perhaps you are," murmured Hazell.

"Yes, but what then?" insisted the other distractedly, "the *fact* remains, oh, that remains!"

"I know," said Hazell; and he proceeded firmly, "there is something much more important than subtleties. Whatever you could tell me, still I know quite well that you were not in your right mind."

"I — you mean? — you are sure?" muttered the stranger in great agitation. "No, it's nonsense! Get away with all that talk! Get away with it! It's real what I'm telling you! Look, here in this bag —." And he made as though to open it.

Hazell was seized with horror. He had been guarding against this from the very beginning.

"Don't!" he shouted — "you leave that bag closed! Do you hear? Put it down!"

They remained, the two of them, staring insanely at one another.

"No need — for that," said Hazell with difficulty.

He began to walk up and down before the motionless and seated stranger. Suddenly he stopped in front of him and asked in a singular voice, "Why was it you came here with that bag?"

"You — you know quite well."

"Yes, I know quite well," answered Hazell, who

Midnight

had approached his face very close to that of the other man, "I know quite well, but I want you to tell me."

"Because you, alone, can explain."

"Yes, yes, but the bag, the bag! Think!"

Their faces were almost touching.

"Attend to me!" said Hazell at last. "You bring evidence. Why do you do that?"

The other remained obstinately silent.

"Shall I tell you?" proceeded Hazell in a new and authoritative tone. "Shall I tell you why you have not destroyed that evidence? Shall I tell you why you took it?" He did not wait for a response but added immediately, "You took it because you knew that some day or other you would confess."

The man rose and approached Hazell. His whole face had become wonderfully bright.

"I say, just repeat that," he murmured, with an idiotic smile.

"You have all along intended to confess," said Hazell gravely.

"You swear it?"

"Yes, I swear it."

"God, Thou hast not totally deserted me!" cried his visitor: "Thou art merciful — blessed, blessed be Thy name!"

A rapturous expression had overspread his face. Hazell waited for what would happen. He did not

The Echo of Voices

know why what he had just said should so have lightened the murderer's heart. But his psychological instinct had been true. That's where these novelists have the pull.

By now the stranger was walking impetuously up and down the room. "Oh, I cannot speak!" burst from him. "You have washed away all my bitterness. What does anything matter now that I am at rest? To-morrow I shall confess all. Let me go!"

Hazell let him go forth without a word.

The most inconceivable part of this story is really the end. Would you believe it? — Hazell never tried to find out anything further. So he says, at any rate. He never even read the paper on the following days. Amazing man! It seemed to him that he knew enough. What could details tell him? Besides, you understand, an artist must keep his atmosphere intact. (Forgive my cynicism.) To this day he is not certain whether the stranger did actually confess or not — he is not even certain whether he *had* anything to confess. (By the way, are you?) Perhaps he thinks he was an escaped lunatic. I repeat, Amazing man! His idea is sufficient for him. He won't discuss the matter or allow any one to tell him anything. But I strongly suspect that he may make use of it one of these days

Midnight

in a book — (again I must crave your forgiveness)
— for I notice that he is beginning to be known as
“Our English Dostoievsky.”

HIS KINGDOM

80042B

HIS KINGDOM

I HAD gone into the store to buy a pound of bacon and was rather surprised to find the equable Mrs. Klip in a state of open revolt against destiny. It is true that her late husband had failed on three separate occasions and that she had been left a widow only a year ago with six small children and debts sufficient to warrant a fourth bankruptcy, but, knowing her as I did, I should never have expected a word of complaint.

"No, I can't stand it any longer," she exclaimed, as she rolled the bacon in a piece of paper.

"Can't stand what, Mrs. Klip?" I enquired politely.

"The whole thing," she replied with indignation. "Think of it, Mr. Brown has taken to drink now!"

"Mr. Brown taken to drink?" I repeated incredulously.

"Yes, Mr. Brown," she insisted bitterly. "He's liquoring up in the back-room at the present moment."

I was greatly shocked. I couldn't imagine Mr.

The Echo of Voices

Brown "liquoring up" anywhere. He was not that sort of person at all. "Why, he must be nearly sixty," I said to myself—not, indeed, that age is any criterion of respectability but I was thinking rather of his grave deportment and assured position. For in the short time he had been with Mrs. Klip (he had appeared from some remote corner of the Orange Free State in reply to her advertisement) he had become universally esteemed and had managed the store so commendably that he had succeeded in staving off the fourth bankruptcy.

"Oh, Mrs. Klip, what can have happened to him?" I stammered.

"He's broken out, that's all," she replied vindictively.

Mr. Brown "broken out"—it was a horrible thought! For I must tell you that I had a high opinion of Mr. Brown and considered him one of my friends. At first, it is true, I had been rather repelled by the cold propriety of his bearing (so different to that of the late Klip), but, happening one day to enter the store as he was giving an extremely graphic description of how to eat a naartje, I had suddenly taken a liking to him and had resolved to "draw him out." I had not been very successful in the ordinary sense, that is to say I had learned nothing of Mr. Brown's personal history, but I wouldn't have missed the experience for anything.

His Kingdom

Mr. Brown was a very remarkable man. Many a Sunday walk we had taken together over the veldt or along the reedy banks of the river. He would never come to my farm but we used to meet by appointment outside the store. He would wait for me there beneath the shadow of the loquat tree. Standing very still, with his eyes fixed upon the distance, he had an absorbed and venerable appearance. In his slouch hat and with his long grey beard he looked more like a Boer patriarch than an Englishman. I used to come upon him suddenly round a corner of the road. He was invariably alone. Mrs. Klip and her six children would be sleeping after their Sunday dinner, her sister, the post-mistress, would be "carrying on," out of sight, with one of her young men, while even that famous bore (and retired school-master) Mrs. Klip's father, would be dozing in his patch of garden at the back with a pipe between his lips.

Mr. Brown would greet me without a smile and together we would start walking across the veldt. He was fond of discussing matters of botany and natural history. "I have studied these questions a little," he would add apologetically. The excuse was quite superfluous — he was an expert.

"Three things have been named after me," he once confided in a moment of expansion, "one of your Cape heaths, the son of a chief, and a cray-

The Echo of Voices

fish from the Zambesi — it was a long time ago.”

“You have been a collector?” I hazarded.

“Amongst other things,” he answered drily.

I did not press the subject.

He had a habit of stopping suddenly, after a long spell of silent walking, and of flourishing his hand round the whole circuit of the valley.

“I often think,” he would say, “that one day some one will arise who will be able to give a voice to all this.”

He would nod his head, digging his stick into the dry earth of the veldt.

“I wonder,” he would add pensively.

He was not given to following out aloud such trains of fancy. That, perhaps, was why he appeared so enigmatic to me. For, after all, though he had not told me his history I could guess at that. South Africa is full of wandering Englishmen, educated men, men of ability, who have lost every home-tie and who have grown old in failure. One soon gets used to them. And yet Mr. Brown did not quite fit the picture — there was no trembling about *his* mouth, no talk of former importance (if you except the story of the Zambesi crayfish, etc.), no hauteur ending in sentimental tears. He was one of the few men I have ever known whose dignity was a complete protection. He would serve Cape Boys with the same air with which he might have greeted the

His Kingdom

President of the Royal Society. His manner was, at once, cheerful and reticent. Mrs. Klip and her family adored him and even Mrs. Klip's father, who had never been known to talk about any one but himself, once observed to me at the end of a long conversation that Mr. Brown was "an excellent listener and full of agreeable information." As this remark appeared to have nothing to do with the subject in hand, I suppose it may very well have been aimed at me, but all the same, considering the source, I regard it as a singular piece of testimony. Yes, nobody knew anything about Mr. Brown and everybody respected him. You may well ask why. In the natural course of events he was just the sort of man South Africans would have looked askance at. Probably I was the only person who knew that he was learned, a philosopher, a man of imagination, but I think he impressed every one by his personality. And that's the great secret of power after all, this genius that comes to one without effort, this magnetic influence which can make him a man or — or destroy him. . . .

Still, if he did not quite fit the picture, it was probable, all the same, that he did belong to the great category of South African failures. As we walked leisurely across the veldt I would give him an occasional side-glance, trying to pierce, so to speak, his everlasting reserve. All in vain. He would

The Echo of Voices

make these rather strange remarks of his without so much as turning a hair. He was an enigma. I would as soon have thought of asking him intimate questions about himself as I would have of knocking him on the head. Being with him was like being with a monarch (a monarch who would have been delighted to sell you some tinned asparagus) — you instinctively waited for him to suggest subjects of conversation. It sounds absurd, I daresay, but it's quite true.

I remember that one Sunday afternoon we had wandered down to the river and finding a yellow bank of sand between the reeds had sat there watching the shadows deepen upon the mountains. We were later than usual and the water, stealing by us in the dusk, had grown indistinct before we rose to go. We had not spoken for nearly an hour but at the moment of departure old Brown said to me in that odd way he had of talking apropos of nothing: —

“On the slope above Cayley's farm, where they are ploughing up the soil to plant vines, they have found a number of stone arrow-heads.” He paused to make in the sand these eternal dim designs with his stick. “An extinct race,” he continued meditatively: “they have left no record, there is no history in this land, and yet here, on the veldt, I feel the passage of thousands of years.” He waved his hand over the dark valley on which the silence of the

His Kingdom

African night had already fallen. "Thousands of years," he muttered again in a low voice. I waited for him to say something more. You know, one occasionally has, quite illogically, these strange and expectant moments. Around us all was peaceful. Over the darkness of the veldt the pipits were rising and falling with their melancholy whistle. The river gurgled in the reeds, the frogs croaked, and the great mountains, black against the sky, appeared like sentinels watching the valley. And I listened for his voice as though suddenly I should hear words that would illuminate the dark history of this ancient land. Yes, I listened intently. And he said nothing more, not a word. But he sighed deeply, as though he, too, were very old and his past life all forgotten, useless, and lost forever.

We walked home without exchanging a word.

For some reason or other this scene, especially, had made a great impression on me. Every time Mr. Brown sold me things over the counter I used to recall it with amazement. It was not, perhaps, so much what he had said as the feeling that he could have said so much more — well, I can't quite explain. But, as I say, it used to make me look at him in amazement, as he stood there serenely aloof behind the wooden counter, with the rows of bottles level with his head, and the smell of sawdust and cheese filling the hot air. . . .

The Echo of Voices

And this, this was the man who had been "liquoring up" in the back-room! No, impossible! I gazed at Mrs. Klip in bewilderment.

"You can't mean it," insisted.

Mrs. Klip shrugged her shoulders.

"Go in and see for yourself," she recommended disdainfully.

I passed behind the counter and through the passage into a squalid room, which was in semi-twilight and which appeared to be half bed-chamber and half store-cupboard. Cases of mottled soap, sugar, tinned milk, and bags of coffee were piled up along one side and on the other was a truckle-bed on which Mr. Brown was lying half-dressed. There was something tragic and grotesque about his appearance. He looked tousled like a little wild man of the woods caught in a trap. He lay on his back with his grey beard sprawling across his chest and one hand over on the floor clasping an empty bottle of Cape brandy. He was talking rapidly to himself and with his loose hand he kept making commanding gestures at the ceiling. His face wore a severe and almost majestic expression but drops of sweat were hailing down his forehead and his dull eyes were half closed. He had evidently not noticed my entrance. I couldn't make out what he was saying but he seemed to be repeating words like, "My future, my future". . .

His Kingdom

I went across the room and standing by his bed I said in my ordinary voice, "What is the matter, old friend?"

He looked at me for an instant without a flicker of recognition and then turned away towards the wall.

"Here's another of them," he muttered in a quick, husky whisper, "here's another of them. Get off! I'm not the man you think. I'm Brown, Brown, *the* Brown. Ha, ha! You ask them, you ask them up there. They know me. Brown — that's my name. O Lord, my future, my future!"

Suddenly he added in a totally different voice, "Is that you?"

"Yes," I answered.

He opened his eyes and stared round at me out of the corners.

"Hum, I thought," he began — "have you been here long?" And he wound up gloomily, "You'd best go — I'm not well."

"I shall call for you on Sunday as usual," I replied cheerfully.

He did not answer and I went out of the room. What a wretched business it was altogether! I felt somehow that I should like to slink away and hide my head. And coming out of the passage the first thing I saw was the lugubrious and inquisitive face of Mrs. Klip.

The Echo of Voices

"Well, I told you," she said, with a sort of dreary satisfaction.

"Really, Mrs. Klip, you're mistaken," I responded coldly. "I've been having a conversation with Mr. Brown. He's ill. That's what's the matter with him."

Of course it was no use my saying anything. I knew Mrs. Klip quite well enough to be certain that old Brown would "go," but I felt so savage that I could have given her a good shaking.

"Ill!" echoed that excellent woman with great spirit. "It's the last time he'll be ill like that in my house. And I trusting him so!"

There was nothing left for me to do. Every one in the valley was acquainted with Mrs. Klip's moral code. It was all up with Brown as far as the store was concerned.

I began to walk slowly homewards. "Yes, this is how he'll end," I thought, seeing, as it were, the whole of his future before me as clearly as the dusty road. "Yes, in some miserable room in some God-forsaken store back of nowhere." I, too, like Mrs. Klip, felt rebellious against destiny. One knew what would happen. In a few days Mr. Brown would simply melt out of the valley as though he had never existed. People would shake their heads, Mrs. Klip would advertise for a new store-keeper, and in a month he would be entirely forgotten. And as

His Kingdom

for old Brown, he would reappear presently a thousand miles away, with the same charm of manner, the same power of persuasion, and the same "soft spot."

How plain it was! People don't alter at that time of life. He would go on and on, flitting mysteriously over a continent, arriving suddenly and leaving "under a cloud," obliging, politely-reserved, and utterly lonely. And, at last, the end, the inglorious death, the veldt grave — and who would care? Nobody, not a single being. And all his experience, his knowledge, his personality would go out like a spark that has lit no fire. Ah, these are the most hopeless cases! . . .

"Is there nothing to be done?" I said aloud.

There was no answer. My only audience was the valley, lying bathed in early twilight. In its perfect stillness, in the repose of ages, it seemed to listen with ironical unconcern. "Men die, trees wither, I remain." So be it!

I did not dare put into words the idea that had floated across my mind. There would be time enough on Sunday. ("Precious fool that you are," whispered a little inward voice.) Yes, time enough — wait till Sunday.

But I did not have to wait till Sunday. At about 5 o'clock on Saturday afternoon I was coming up towards my stoep when I saw my house-boy Koos approaching with an air of secrecy and importance.

The Echo of Voices

I have noticed that when Koos walks like that it generally means that he's been too clever by half.

"Well, what are you hanging about for?" I asked him roughly.

Koos, who has a strong eye for dramatic situations, pointed over his shoulder towards the house.

"Dat dere Mistah Brown waitin' to see you," he observed contemptuously.

(Bad news travels fast over the valley.)

He gave a superior smile.

"Don't grin like that at me!" I shouted.
"Where is he — in the study?"

Pained surprise was depicted on the face of that snobbish individual.

"No, sah, in de passage," he muttered.

I didn't say anything, but I gave him a glance which I'm sure made him feel very unwell for several hours, and I ran past him into the house.

In the darkest part of the passage, just outside the door of my study, Mr. Brown was standing motionless.

"Come, come in here, Mr. Brown!" I cried, flinging open the door; "that ass Koos has been making a fool of himself as usual!"

Mr. Brown, austere and venerable in appearance, followed me quietly into the room. He had not said a word. I bustled about with chairs and going to the window I yelled to Koos to "hurry up with

His Kingdom

some tea out there." What had old Brown come for, I wondered, not giving him a chance to explain. Before these critical, and unsmiling eyes I felt extraordinarily confused. I turned from the window and sat down opposite him.

"I didn't know you could get off on a Saturday," I began.

"I'm off altogether," replied Mr. Brown in a level voice.

"Oh, I see, it's like that, is it?" I answered lamely.

He sat very upright, with his grey beard flowing grandly over his chest and an air of solemnity upon his rugged face.

"I have come to see you before I go," he proceeded remorselessly, "because I owe you an apology. I have permitted you to make a friend of me under false pretences."

"No, no, Mr. Brown," I said quickly, "you're putting it all wrong. There's no question of false pretences. I've always valued your friendship highly and I always will."

"Pardon me, there is nothing to value about my friendship. You have found that out for yourself."

"I must be the best judge of that," I broke in heartily. "Look here, Mr. Brown, before you came there wasn't a soul here I cared to speak to. You've made all the difference in my life. There's not a

The Echo of Voices

man to touch you in the whole valley. And now you want to go and clear out! No, it won't do, it won't do, Mr. Brown! I want you to stay here with me. Are you listening? I want to give you a post on my farm — I've been meaning to ask you for a long time. Come and help me with my citrous trees. I ask you now definitely, Mr. Brown, will you?"

I had risen and gone to the window from where I could see Koos laying tea on the stoep. Mr. Brown was silent.

"Say yes," I cried all at once, spinning round impetuously, "say yes, Mr. Brown!"

But Mr. Brown sadly shook his head.

"No, I must get away from here," he muttered.

"But why, why must you?" I expostulated.

Beneath its tan Mr. Brown's skin seemed to redden.

"I must," he repeated in a firm tone.

I felt angry. Why should people behave like this? I began to walk up and down the room, fuming to myself. I avoided his eye.

After a minute he added quietly, "Forgive me, I have no choice."

"No choice, Mr. Brown? Why, you have only to say 'Yes' and it's done. Your future is assured."

Mr. Brown got up noiselessly and joined me over at the window.

His Kingdom

"I am a man without a future," he mumbled.

There was a silence.

"With a dead past and no future," he continued in the same voice, gazing straight out over the veldt.

I did not say anything.

"I have been in Africa nearly forty years and they are as blank as a clean slate. What I have done has been forgotten, what I have felt has withered within my heart. I am an old man before my time — and disgraced. I have no future."

Grave and still he stood in the flushed light of the window, facing the sweep of the valley.

"I could have made a great name. My history is the failure of success. Wherever I went I had only to put out my hand. I was like a king going hither and thither, invincible. . . ."

He paused and sighed deeply as I had heard him sigh that other evening by the river.

"Come out onto the stoep and we can talk," I suggested.

We went out, sat down, and drank some tea. But we did not talk, not for a long time. The setting light had caught the mountains and the whole range appeared to hang suffused above the sombre veldt.

"And it will be so when we are dust," said Mr. Brown suddenly.

It was one of those remarks which require no comment.

The Echo of Voices

"Yes, when we are dust," he repeated, as though in a dream. "Do you know that when I was a young man it always seemed to me that the world would stop at my death? I was as proud as Lucifer. I had only one desire. I wanted to bend everything to my will. But long ago a girl whispered in my ear, 'Oh, wait with me, if you wander and wander you will lose your soul.' How long ago! And I laughed in her face. I laughed loudly, confidently, with love in my heart. For I thought to myself, 'I will conquer the veldt—it is nothing—and I will return to her then.' And behold—I am even as you see me now. And the veldt remains—unconquered."

He had risen and was pointing over the earth.

"I never did return," he added softly.

It gave me an uncanny sensation to hear him speak thus, echoing as he did so many of my own conclusions about him.

"This land has got hold of me," he added suddenly, "has got into my blood. I cannot resist it. It comes over me from time to time, the desire of wandering, strong as life itself, and I must go, I must wander. I struggle. It has ruined me before and it will again and again till all is over. I remember my past. 'If you had listened,' I say to myself, 'you would have been happy, you would have been famous. Yes, famous!'—and now! I feel a

His Kingdom

wild despair. I shut myself into my room and I try to drown everything — ah, you know!”

He stood before me in the dusk, trembling with passion.

“This time you must stay,” I said to him.

“No, I must start — at once.”

The glow was fading from the mountains. The whole earth was black as night and a few stars were glittering in the deep sky. The sweet, powerful scent of the orchards was rising through the warm air.

He jumped up.

“There is no time to lose,” he said resolutely. “At eight o’clock the mail-cart passes by the store. I have to pack.” He hesitated. “I don’t know how to say good-bye to you. I have done nothing to deserve your kindness. Every word you say fills me with bitterness. There is only this — I would have stayed if it had been possible.”

“I will walk with you so far,” I said.

And silently we went towards the open veldt through the long groves of the orchards. There was not a breath of wind, not a cloud upon the sky. All the valley slept, with its dim contours grouped like crouching animals upon the plain and its thousand night-voices murmuring like the echo of a far-off sea.

I took leave of him by the store. I watched him

The Echo of Voices

disappear inside and, turning, I made my way home through the dark. . . . Yes, I repeat, these are the most hopeless cases. . . .

I was fated to see Mr. Brown once more. It was three years later. I had taken a trip to Cape Town to interview a Greek about some fruit business and, having a few dollars to spare, I began to explore the city. I did it thoroughly; I went into all sorts of places where the residents of Rondebosch and Rosebank never find themselves. I pushed my way into the purlieus of mean streets where the "poor" whites of half an Africa tremble before the curses of coloured women and eke out a wretched existence with mongrel dogs. It is not a pleasant sight but it is very curious. When you stand upon the shoulder of Table Mountain and gaze upon the spreading city outlined by blue ocean and violet range it hardly occurs to you, perhaps, that the golden fruit is full of rotten sores. But it is — and as local colour they are worth a probe. . . .

So one afternoon, about two o'clock, I had entered a bar in the Salt River district. I was thirsty and tired. Through the glass partition I could see a billiard-room which appeared empty, and I thought I would take my whisky in there and have it in peace. The girl behind the bar condescended to give me permission. She observed that there was

His Kingdom

only the marker inside and that he was "trash"—I could do what I liked. I thanked her graciously and went into the billiard-room.

Yes, there was only the marker and *he* was not likely to trouble me. In the quiet of the afternoon he lay fast asleep on the settee. He had pulled a dirty handkerchief over his face, which kept fluttering up from his mouth and sinking down again every time he breathed. In the stifling heat flies were buzzing noisily round his head, half-drowning his regular snores. His clothes were old, dirty, and fraying at the edges and his boots were down at heel. Even in that room of cracked mirrors, with loud advertisements on the walls, and its general air of dust and decay, he made a sordid and ignominious picture. But at the first sight of him I had been filled with uneasiness. Where had I seen that figure before? He stirred suddenly and I caught a glimpse of a grey and noble beard straggling from under the handkerchief. Good God—it was Mr. Brown! I sat down so abruptly that I spilt half the contents of the glass. The other half I swallowed at a gulp. Mr. Brown—a billiard-marker! I got up, went on tip-toe across the room, and lifted a corner of the handkerchief. But it was not the big fly settling upon his forehead that made me drop it immediately. No, it was something else altogether. On that dignified and expressive countenance the ravages of

The Echo of Voices

time had wrought a frightful change — and not only a material change, do you understand? I covered it again as I would have covered the face of a corpse . . . Mr. Brown would make very few more journeys.

I waited for an instant to regain command of myself and then I hurried out into the street. I was in need of fresh air. The coloured girl watched my departure with the most perfect indifference and I — I did not dare to stop and question her. I was terrified of revelations — not even a barmaid would have called Mr. Brown “trash” three years ago. . . .

It was my last sight of that remarkable man.

THE WOULD-BE FRIENDS

THE WOULD-BE FRIENDS

ONE Saturday afternoon at four o'clock a young man of about twenty-five was waiting outside the door of a second-hand bookseller's shop in Charing Cross Road. He was the kind of young man that is to be seen anywhere, the nondescript clerk type, rather undersized, nominally clean-shaven, with a pallid, cunning expression, and seedy clothes. He seemed to be expecting some one because he kept looking impatiently up and down the street. All at once he straightened himself up and crossed the road. A man who was walking rapidly up from the direction of Trafalgar Square cast on him a perfunctory glance of half-recognition and would have proceeded without a word had not the little clerk accosted him with these words spoken in a tone of cheeky deference:—

“Good afternoon, Mr. Turner.”

The other started and looked at him again, but this time much more closely.

“Mr. Turner — yes, that's my name sure enough. But who are you? I seem to recognise you. Have we met somewhere?”

The Echo of Voices

He spoke in a rather forced, jovial voice. He was a man with a certain "manner," fully ten years older than the clerk, and had probably risen in life.

"In a way of speaking, Mr. Turner. In fact, if you will allow me, that's what I want to talk to you about."

"Talk to me? — well, come along. I was just going in there to get some tea."

He pointed up the street and smiled patronisingly. Then he added: —

"By all means, Mr.— Mr.—"

"Mr. Garbendyke," suggested the little clerk subserviently.

"Mr. Garbendyke — oh Lord! Come along then, Mr. Garbendyke."

Mr. Garbendyke bit his lip and an evil look passed over his unhealthy face. He smiled.

"Yes, it's an odd name, Mr. Turner. It's done me no good, I can assure you."

"I daresay not. Never mind. It won't spoil my tea, at any rate. Garbendyke — oh Lord! Come along."

Mr. Garbendyke had some difficulty in keeping up with the other's rapid strides. Nor did he speak again until they were seated on a plush lounge before a marble-topped table and Mr. Turner had ordered tea in a loud and peremptory voice. Then he said, rubbing his chin:—

The Would-Be Friends

"You must think me very strange, Mr. Turner?"

"Your name's strange, certainly. But what was it you were wanting to see me about?"

The face of the clerk flushed for an instant as he replied, "Some business, Mr. Turner."

"Business? — oh, really! What business?"

"Listen, Mr. Turner. Every Saturday afternoon you walk up Charing Cross Road like you were doing to-day. Then when you've had tea here you walk down again, visiting all the second-hand book-shops on the way. That's so, isn't it?"

"What are you driving at? — go on!"

Mr. Garbendyke attempted a wink of familiarity, but, meeting only the stare of Mr. Turner's eyes, went very white.

"I know what sort of books you buy," he concluded lamely.

"Oh, damn, is that all you want to tell me?"

Mr. Turner looked extremely annoyed and oddly nervous.

"Oh, no, Mr. Turner. Just be patient. What I mean is, I know you buy books that can be sold again at a profit. I've often been astonished. 'There's a man who understands the ropes,' I've thought many a time. I know something about books, Mr. Turner. I've made my living by them these ten years off and on. I get them from barrows and sell them to the booksellers. You need knowledge for

The Echo of Voices

that. Well, excuse me. I've watched you with admiration, sir. 'Here's a gentleman buying for his library,' I used to say to myself. But then every Saturday — hum, I began to wonder. And so many books — bargains, dirt cheap. "Top shelf literature" and all that — eh?' If only I'd had money myself. However, that's just it — I hadn't."

Mr. Turner fidgeted in his seat.

"This is all very well, Mr. Garbendyke, but positively I can't . . ."

The clerk, who looked frightened and excited, stopped him by holding up his hand.

"Please speak lower, Mr.—Whitelaw," he murmured.

The other man half jumped out of his seat.

"Who the hell are you?" he said in a violent whisper.

"I? — oh, I am just what I tell you! Of no importance. Most negligible in every way. Still, I am a man of ideas, Mr.—well, Mr. Turner."

In the darkening restaurant he smiled again.

There was a slight pause, but after a second or two Mr. Garbendyke began once more:—"You know, Mr. Turner, if I had your means and your — your courage I would have made a fortune by now. I've seen you do things — we needn't go into details — which I've admired. And you have a way with you, Mr. Turner. You can do the 'legitimate'

The Would-Be Friends

right enough. No one would suspect. Just the sort of book I'm after myself. But does it never occur to you, Mr. Turner, does it never occur to you that you're not making a good use of all this? Have you never said to yourself 'I need a partner'?"

Mr. Turner, who had been listening intently, suddenly began to laugh. But, strange to say, he laughed inwardly, making no sound. This lasted for some time, while the little clerk waited patiently, sipping his tea with a demure and pleased expression.

"All these 'evers' of yours," remarked Mr. Turner all at once, "make me wish to ask you something—did you ever hear of Caius Caligula? I'll tell you a story about him. One day at dinner he was laughing like anything for no reason at all and when two senators politely asked him the cause he observed that he was thinking that if he were so much as to nod, their heads would be off before they could turn round. That story always appeals to me. I really must be a sort of Caligula myself. While you were speaking just now I was thinking, 'Suppose I were to call a policeman and have him arrested for blackmail.' No wonder I laughed."

"Blackmail!—my dear Mr. Whitelaw—I beg your pardon—Mr. Turner."

The Echo of Voices

The other's expression had suddenly become very gloomy.

"Yes, and I shall do it still if you don't take care," he muttered.

"No, I think not, I think not, Mr. Turner. Firstly, because I haven't blackmailed you, and secondly — well, to tell you the truth, it would be worse for you than for me. I am not here to make an enemy of you. There's such a thing as mutual benefit. You have the courage, the manner, yes, the money too, but I have something just as important — the power of organisation. Besides, Mr. Turner, after all it's not as if you could give your whole time to it. Ah, that's the weak spot! To make money a man must concentrate. Now, how can you be travelling about the country and at the same time . . ."

Mr. Turner's look had been growing still more sombre.

"I warn you," he interrupted threateningly, "that you are playing a game I don't like. You are evidently a scoundrel."

He looked as if he would have added more had he not suddenly remembered something.

"Why do you go on calling me Whitelaw?" he finished uneasily.

"Why? — because I'm not really sure what your

The Would-Be Friends

name is. You will forgive me, Mr. Turner, but you know it is rather difficult to say."

Mr. Turner frowned impatiently.

"Abominable inuendoes," he snorted. "What are you up to?"

The other looked crestfallen.

"I was sure you would misunderstand me," he began plaintively. "My only wish is to do good to us both. Of course it's easy to blame me. I'm too frank. Every one speaks well of you. If we were to go into any of these shops together and you were to say, 'You see this fellow, he accuses me of — what shall I call it — "imperfect sense of property," they would laugh.' 'Why, that scarecrow,' they would reply, 'we know all about him — an out-of-work tout! Don't you bother, sir.' Can't I hear them! Good gracious, they'd probably think it was *I* who had been taking their books. There, how stupid of me, I've let it out! Well, well! And suppose in my desperation I were to answer, 'Will the gentleman give you his address and tell you what his employment is,' and they were to press you, you would clear yourself at once. 'I have a permanent room at the — Club' (I'll just whisper the name in your ear) 'and I'm employed by —, —, —,' (let me just whisper again) — 'I travel for them!' I would look like a fool, wouldn't I? It would be a case

The Echo of Voices

for a policeman all right. But suppose, just as he was coming, I were to make one final appeal like this, 'Will you go with this gentleman to such and such an address in Chelsea?' (he wrote something on a scrap of paper and held it for a moment close to Mr. Turner's face) 'and ask there what his name is, and will you examine his flat and tell me! . . .' eh, Mr. Turner, suppose I were to do that?"

Mr. Turner got up slowly from his seat. His face was white and trembling with passion — or fear.

"Keep quiet!" he whispered; "do you want to ruin us both?"

"No, I want to make both our fortunes."

The little clerk spoke very distinctly and more authoritatively than he had done before.

"I want to make both our fortunes, I say. I'm poor — I haven't got a stiver. I slept on the Embankment last night. What do you think I have to lose? I'm not afraid of prison. I'm perfectly reckless. You can understand what that means. But for you — well, make your choice."

He had thrown off all his servility.

"Make your choice," he repeated after a silence, "and hurry up."

Mr. Turner remained standing, looking formidably at the clerk. At this second challenge he suddenly sat down.

"Very good," he said deliberately.

The Would-Be Friends

The clerk cocked an eye at him.

"What shall we call it — Whitelaw and Garbendyke?" he sniggered, squirming in his seat and speaking in his old voice. "Shall we christen it that?"

"Oh, you cunning devil!"

"I'll make both our fortunes, Mr. Turner, never you fear. I think I ought to start at once, don't you?"

There was a veiled note in this last sentence.

"Oh, you cunning devil!" said Mr. Turner again. Garbendyke smiled deprecatingly.

"You musn't take on like this, Mr. Turner, sir," he murmured, "I assure you that your interests won't suffer. Come, I'll be honest with you. I admit that I'm thinking of number one, but you see I can't help number one without helping number two. It is so, isn't it? But seriously, now, when do you think I should start?"

Mr. Turner looked as if he were about to have an apoplectic fit.

"Do you mean to accompany me when I leave this shop?" he asked in a savage undertone.

Garbendyke watched him intently.

"Yes," he answered after a moment's delay. "You always spend the week-ends *there*. What could be better?"

Mr. Turner's lips were tightly pressed together.

The Echo of Voices

He seemed to be restraining himself by a great effort.

"Listen you — what do you call yourself? — Garbendye," he said in a raised voice, "I warn you that you won't come well out of this."

"Be careful what you say, Mr. Turner. Lower your voice. There's a girl just behind us bringing the bill."

Mr. Garbendye spoke softly but his raised hand trembled a little. It was impossible to see his face in the dusk of the shop, but the very sound of his voice, so gentle and menacing, brought Mr. Turner to his senses.

"Well, so be it," he said briefly, as he rose.

They went out together into the street.

They had not walked a hundred yards when Mr. Turner hailed a cab and, bundling in Garbendye before him, gave the driver an address in Chelsea.

"Now, Garbendye," he began resolutely, making his voice heard above the jolt of the cab, "let us come to a clear understanding. This, of course, is an ordinary case of blackmail. Yes, it is — don't contradict! You think you can squeeze me and I daresay you're chuckling at your success. All right — chuckle away. I'm not grudging it you. Only remember that there's always a point where the worm turns. However, that'll do for that. I begin to think there may be something in what you say. You did hit on the weak spots of my business. A man

The Would-Be Friends

who can do that can do more. That's how I see it. At any rate, I'm going to give you a chance. There's the long and the short of it."

Mr. Garbendyke had sat listening quite still with a smile on his face.

"You will not regret it, Mr. Turner," he answered in a voice humble and mocking. "What I say is, let bygones be bygones. We're here to work together for each other's advantage. Only don't give way to anger, sir. It's very unjustifiable between friends."

He ended with a disagreeable laugh.

Mr. Turner spoke with difficulty as he replied, "You'd better do well by me, by gum!"

"There, there, Mr. Whitelaw — how stupid of me — Mr. Turner, I mean, don't take on so. I'm not posing as a disinterested person. I help myself by helping you. You know that yourself, don't you? Of course, you do. Please be reasonable."

Mr. Turner thought for a minute. His ideas were probably becoming more formed.

"Tell me exactly what you propose?" he asked suddenly.

"Now we're getting to the point. I propose, Mr. Turner, to organise your business by giving my whole time to it. I'm not bringing references" (he giggled), "but one week will show you what I can do. One short week, Mr. Turner. While you're at

The Echo of Voices

your office or in the country or at your club, I'll be slaving away in Chelsea. Your business is the kind that can be enormously developed. And along lines of which every one would approve too" (he giggled again) — "safe lines. Still, I won't speak too much about that. But what happens as things are? You're there over week-ends and, say, a couple of nights during the week for a few hours. What can you expect? The business stagnates — it must. But I'll be on the spot all the time — examining catalogues, making out lists, organising, enlarging. Mr. Turner, you don't begin to guess the money that's slipping through your fingers."

"Do you mean to live there?" asked the other in a strangled voice.

"Live there? — of course! Where else should I live? You wait till you see your receipts going up. Besides, don't you need some one to admit callers?"

"My business is American."

"Ah, I was wondering — I thought it must be. Still, Americans do call now and then, I suppose. But that's not really the point. What I intend to do is to *make* the business. I daresay even now it's tidy enough — in fact, if I may say so . . ."

He spoke in a jocular tone.

"No, you may not," shouted Mr. Turner all at once.

A deep silence followed this outbreak, which was not broken till they had left the cab and were climb-

The Would-Be Friends

ing a long, winding flight of stone stairs. Then, on the point of opening the door, Mr. Turner whispered to his companion, "Never call me anything but Whitelaw here."

It was pitch dark inside the flat.

"Just wait outside a moment while I turn on the light," said Mr. Turner — or rather, Mr. Whitelaw.

Garbendyke heard him stamping about inside the passage and suddenly the whole place was lit up. At his very feet lay a great pile of unopened letters.

"Come in and I'll shut the door," said Mr. Whitelaw. "Three days' accumulation," he continued, stooping down and gathering up his correspondence in both hands. "I haven't been round since Wednesday. We'll take them in here," and he nodded towards a door on the left. Garbendyke opened it and switched on the light. He entered, followed by Mr. Whitelaw. They might have stepped into the inner room of a second-hand book-seller's shop. Glass cases, running up to the ceiling, hid the walls on three sides. Mr. Garbendyke gave them a rapid glance. Scattered over the floor near the cases, scattered neatly, with method, were piles of books, of portfolios full with prints, of bulky brown paper parcels. They made an uneven rampart a couple of feet high, full of lanes and breaches, to within a short way of a large table

The Echo of Voices

that stood in the middle of the room. This table contained heaps of circulars, wrappers, postcards, writing paper, brown paper, tissue paper, envelopes of every size, also bottles of red and black ink, a ball of string, several small metal boxes, sealing wax, blotting paper, etc., etc.—all very neat and business like. Over against the window was a bureau of old oak. Mr. Whitelaw, his hands full of letters, made his way to the table.

“Come here, Garbendyke!” he called out over his shoulder to the little clerk who had remained standing by the door, staring inquisitively round him.

Mr. Whitelaw sat down inertly, letting his armful of letters flow over the table before him. He appeared to be sunk in gloomy reflections. Garbendyke noiselessly approached.

“Speak, can’t you?” said Mr. Whitelaw at last in an irritable voice; “what d’you think of the place? Eh, haven’t you a tongue?”

“I’m delighted with it, Mr.—Mr. Whitelaw—most delighted.”

“Are you, indeed? Very condescending of you!”

He began moodily tearing open one letter after another. Garbendyke stood patiently by, stealing rapid glances round the room.

“Excuse my interrupting you, Mr. Whitelaw,” he said presently, “but is this where I’m to work?”

“Yes, it is. I do everything at this table—the

The Would-Be Friends

whole damned business. I even make up my own paper parcels generally. But when I need real packing done—wooden cases or anything of that kind—I get a man in. I've got a little room for that along the passage. He comes about once a week. His wife, too, now and then to dust. But I'll have to explain all that later. Here, come and look through these letters. They'll give you an idea. I'm going out to buy some food—back in half an hour.

He got up abruptly. The little clerk edged his way to the chair.

"Don't bear me any malice, Mr. Whitelaw," he murmured. "You won't regret this day, sir. I'll get to work straight off."

The other gave him a look of hatred and contempt and went out of the room. At the door he turned and shouted insultingly, "Just remember, by the way, that I have a list of every one of my books." A moment later the door of the flat banged behind him.

No sooner did he hear this sound than Garbendyke jumped up and ran out to listen in the passage. The steps were retreating audibly. He stood there, smiling poisonously at the door. An ugly expression had overshadowed his pale and meagre face.

"Make him sorry he was ever born," he said distinctly. "His books!—bah, the fraud!"

The Echo of Voices

But he did not waste time in melodramatic asides. He ran quickly from room to room of the flat, taking in all the contents with marvellous rapidity. He found the tiny packing-den of which Whitelaw had spoken, two bedrooms facing each other across the passage, a small dining-room, a kitchen, and a room with a locked door. This last appeared to fascinate Garbendyke. He returned to it several times, tried the lock softly, and even attempted to peep through the key-hole. It was all in vain. He could do nothing with it. Then, standing indecisively in the passage, he recalled to mind the bureau in the book-room and he ran back there to see if its drawers would open. Almost to his chagrin they were unlocked. They contained only great supplies of stationery, bundles of receipts, of booksellers' catalogues, of collectors' addresses in America, and of letters. He would have looked more closely at the letters had he not heard steps on the stairs. He quickly shut the draws, sat down at the table, and began studying the mail Whitelaw had left with him.

When Mr. Whitelaw entered his flat he went straight into the kitchen with several parcels he had brought back with him. Presently a smell of frying began to pervade the place. Garbendyke, who had finished opening, reading, and docketing the letters and who was now carefully examining the contents of the bookcases, sniffed appreciatively. He had

The Would-Be Friends

eaten very little for the last two weeks. He heard Mr. Whitelaw walking to and fro from the kitchen to the dining-room, the jingling sound of knives and forks, in fact all the usual preparations for supper. Hunger grew upon him as he waited. He thought of his last night's meal of dry crust. His cunning face wore a fatigued and wolfish expression. He gazed languidly round the room, his whole mind centred on the smell of frying sausages. All at once he slipped out into the passage and along to the kitchen. Mr. Whitelaw was just removing the sausages from the frying pan into a dish. He looked up at the intruder in surprise.

"Who asked you in here?" he said.

"Me — oh, nobody, Mr. Whitelaw. I thought perhaps I could help you. I'm a good cook. Are we to have supper now?"

He could not help putting a certain eagerness into this last sentence.

"Looks like it, don't it?" responded Mr. Whitelaw. "Stand aside, please!"

He swept past him with the steaming plate.

A minute later Mr. Garbendyke was cramming sausages into his mouth with indecent haste. Mr. Whitelaw, eating more slowly, watched him with an ironical smile. He seemed pleased for some reason or other — as though he had found the chink in an adversary's armour. The more Garbendyke ate, the

The Echo of Voices

more he watched him and the more jolly he grew. He urged him on to drink several large cups of cocoa, to eat great hunks of bread and butter and some corned beef from a tin. Meanwhile he got out a bottle of whiskey and lit his pipe.

At length he saw that the other had really finished. He moved in his chair.

"Now, suppose we talk business," he said in a hearty and unnecessarily loud voice. Mr. Garbendyke nodded thoughtfully, brushing the crumbs from his mouth.

"Yes, suppose we talk business now," repeated Mr. Whitelaw, pouring out a glass of whiskey for Garbendyke and pushing it across the table.

Garbendyke, who had fully recovered all his caution, remained silent but again nodded assent.

"The truth is I've come to your conclusion. I accept you as a fact — a *fait accompli*, as they say. Let us work loyally together. And why shouldn't we? There's no reason that I can see. I drink to your health, Garbendyke."

Garbendyke smile politely and rather drily. After Mr. Whitlaw had drunk he proceeded in a still more confidential tone, "When I leave here on Monday morning, Garbendyke, you will be in charge. Not a word. I trust you. I agree with what you say about our interests being mutual. I've been thinking it over. You will live here as my guest. I

The Would-Be Friends

daresay you have seen your bedroom" (a slight and transient annoyance came into his voice) "well, that's all right. You will report to me from time to time. I shall often be looking in. You will save me a great deal. Besides, with your knowledge and so on — Mr. Garbendyke, I do believe our meeting has been a fortunate one after all."

He paused for a few seconds, leaning back in his chair and puffing smoke out in a contemplative reverie. Then he continued leisurely, "As for salary, I propose to give you £2 a week."

". . . and a share in the profits," added Mr. Garbendyke very softly.

Mr. Whitelaw did not answer at once. A great alteration had suddenly transformed him.

"I told you not to go too far," he murmured finally. "There are limits — limits, do you hear?"

He had closed his eyes and did not see the look of hate and greed which had come into the face of the clerk. When he spoke again his voice sounded strangely forced, "You must be reasonable, Mr. Garbendyke."

The clerk was breathing quickly and nervously.

"No one wishes to be fairer than I do," he observed vaguely.

Mr. Whitelaw jumped to his feet.

"That's a damned lie," he shouted in a voice of thunder.

The Echo of Voices

Mr. Garbendyke had jumped up at the same instant and stood looking unsteadily at his host.

"Do you want to rouse the whole house?" he snarled.

Both of them remained silent as though appalled by the sudden clamour that had died out so instantaneously. All at once they heard a door being opened cautiously outside the flat. Mr. Whitelaw slipped from the room with a finger to his mouth. He top-toed down the passage; then noiselessly and very swiftly he flung open his outer door. It was exactly as he had expected. In the doorway opposite a little old man was leaning forward in an attitude of strained attention. On catching sight of Mr. Whitelaw he smiled timorously and backed into his own flat. Mr. Whitelaw thoughtfully retraced his steps.

He found Garbendyke just where he had left him.

"It was nothing," he remarked, "nothing at all." Then, changing his tone, he continued, "As to the other thing—I apologise. I lost my temper. What was it you were saying?—you want a share in the profits? Make a business, and I shan't complain. Only be reasonable and don't irritate me. I'm a hasty man—very hasty and violent," he concluded in a gloomy undertone.

Garbendyke still seemed to expect a fresh out-

The Would-Be Friends

break. He looked sourly at Mr. Whitelaw and was inclined to be on the offensive. Whitelaw, on the other hand, seemed anxious to make amends. He kept pressing the little clerk to drink more and more. Indeed, he was becoming quite affable again. He began to explain the ramifications of his business — his legitimate business — with much detail and with great gusto. He outlined new schemes, suggested where Mr. Garbendyke would be of real service, showed him exactly where he, Mr. Whitelaw, failed, and where he, Mr. Garbendyke, was to succeed. He was of opinion that there was really a big thing to be made out of it. Look how huge America was, and then, too, Australia was coming along, and Canada — “as long as we keep far enough from England,” he observed, laughing discreetly and knowingly. “Eh, Mr. Garbendyke? Well, you saw the letters I got to-day. There’s a business here all right.”

Mr. Garbendyke began to thaw a little though still keeping himself very much on the alert. He nodded several times.

“You are right, Mr. Garbendyke,” continued the other deliberately. “You and I together — well, you know the motto. There is a motto, isn’t there? However, as I was saying, two’s strength where one’s weakness. You follow me?”

Again Mr. Garbendyke nodded.

“Oh, I follow you, Mr. Whitelaw,” he murmured.

The Echo of Voices

"It's what I've thought all along. I mean to justify myself, sir."

"You shall, you shall — I'm sure of it."

Mr. Whitelaw got up fussily and began to walk up and down.

"Well, Garbendyke, what about turning in?" he said all at once. "Help me to clear away and then — bed. Eh?"

"Very good, Mr. Whitelaw."

Twenty minutes later Garbendyke had retired to his own room.

He began to undress slowly. Several things about Mr. Whitelaw and his flat still puzzled him. He heard him stamping about in the room opposite and he could well imagine his expression of annoyance and impotent rage. "His books, indeed!" he muttered contemptuously, continuing in his own mind the scene in the library. "I'll soon show him whether I'm dog or not," he added in a whisper, after listening for another minute. But feeling very tired he presently slipped into his sheetless bed, wearing his dirty shirt. The noise still went on in the other room but all at once he heard Mr. Whitelaw come out and next moment knock at his own door.

"Come in," he shouted, jumping up in astonishment.

"Oh, I just looked in to say," remarked Mr. Whitelaw in the doorway, "that I sometimes lie in

The Would-Be Friends

bed rather late on Sunday. Suppose you cook the breakfast to-morrow? You say you're a good cook. They'll leave a can of milk outside the door. See what you can do, at any rate. You'll find bacon and so on in the kitchen. And, by the bye, be as quiet as you can. Very inquisitive lot in these flats, always bothering about other people's affairs." He cleared his throat as though at a painful recollection. "As I say, it's best to keep oneself to oneself. Well, good-night again."

"That'll be all right," answered Garbendyke from his bed; "good-night, Mr. Tur — Mr. Whitelaw."

This interruption had the effect of completely driving away Garbendyke's sleepiness. For some reason or other he now felt particularly alert and wakeful. He heard Mr. Whitelaw go back to his room and then a long time after it seemed to him that he emerged again, but this time very softly and cautiously. Garbendyke got carefully out of bed and put his ear to the door. At the other end of the passage a key was being inserted into a lock. This sound did not really surprise him because, oddly enough, he had been expecting something of the kind. He felt greatly excited. He realised instantly that Mr. Whitelaw was about to enter the locked room. But what to do now? He looked about him in the dark, trying to formulate some plan. He was frightened lest a board should creak or lest he should up-

The Echo of Voices

set something. After a minute's thought he silently opened the door and went out into the passage in his shirt and bare feet. At the further end a light was shining into it. Keeping close to the wall and stepping warily as a cat, Garbendyke made his way towards this light. Like many calculating people he had moments of insane rashness. He felt that if he were discovered he might be the victim of violence, but then if he were *not* discovered . . . Vistas of blackmail and revenge passed rapidly before his mind. And so, step by step, he went noiselessly forward.

And this is what he saw at length. He saw his would-be friend sitting in a tiny room before a little table propped up on which was a glorious illuminated *Horæ*. He seemed to be examining with a magnifying glass a picture of the Holy Child lying on His back in a wide field and gazing up into a sky of deep blue spangled with golden stars. The room was so small that the table, chair, and a large safe were almost its only furniture. A green shaded lamp cast down a brilliant glare upon the open page and left the remainder of the room in shadow. Mr. Whitelaw seemed lost in admiration or in the sheer luxury of possession. His glass slowly traversed the surface of the page as he leant adoringly towards the figure of the Holy Child.

No sooner had Garbendyke seen this book than an expression of incredulous amazement crossed his face.

The Would-Be Friends

It was followed by a smile of the most complete understanding. (He was one of these horrid little men who seemed to know about everything.) Mr. Whitelaw had not stirred in the very least but Garbendyke appeared to have satisfied his curiosity. Stepping into the shadow of the wall he glided back to his own room and crept once more into bed. It was not until he had heard Mr. Whitelaw return, fully an hour later, that he allowed himself to think of sleep.

The next morning he was up betimes. Mr. Whitelaw's door was shut and a sound of snoring showed that he was still asleep. The little clerk quickly dressed himself and then began walking softly about the flat peeping into every corner. He could discover nothing new. After a time it occurred to him that he ought to begin making preparations for breakfast, and he opened the outer door so that he could take in the can of milk. He was greatly surprised to see in the doorway opposite a little old man who gave every appearance of having been listening to his movements. He was one of these small, insignificant, withered old men who look like retired tradesmen in a small way and who always appear extremely nervous and fretful. No sooner did Garbendyke cast eyes on him than he reached the noise of last night which had made Mr. Whitelaw run so hastily to the door (it was a thing that

The Echo of Voices

had given him some thought since) and he associated this old man with the former interruption. The old man, meanwhile, seemed to be in a state of intense curiosity, annoyance, and indecision. He half retreated into his flat and then came out again like a frightened rabbit. He began to address Garbendyke at once:—

“Please note that I have a perfect right to stand here if I want to,” he remarked in a jerky voice; “I decline to be tyrannised over by Mr. Whitelaw or any of his friends. Do you hear that, young man? Definitely decline, I say.”

“I was only just getting the milk,” replied Garbendyke mildly, pointing down at the can.

This observation seemed to mollify the old man’s annoyance and to reawaken his curiosity.

“Well, I am glad to hear it,” he replied. “Mr. Whitelaw does not treat me fairly. But I won’t be tyrannised over. No, I won’t. And why shouldn’t I be inquisitive if I want to be? Can you tell me that, young man? Don’t you suppose I ask myself what all the parcels and cases are that keep going up and down? I’m a person that likes to know about my neighbours. Fine squabble you had last night, and generally so quiet as he is. If it wasn’t that I’m a cautious man I’d have rapped on his door. But I don’t like the way he comes running out whenever he hears me moving. No, I don’t like it.”

The Would-Be Friends

He pouted like an old man in his dotage.

"And who are you?" he continued querulously: "I heard you walking about. 'Why he may have murdered him,' I thought. I don't like it at all."

Garbendyke laughed. He had a notion that he might get some information here.

"Don't like it?" he echoed him in an astonished voice; "What do you mean exactly? — what is it you don't like?"

The little old man blinked his eyes and took a cautious step nearer.

"I don't like all this mystery," he whispered, and then, as though recalling some event, he added angrily, "And mind you, you can tell Mr. Whitelaw from me that I won't be tyrannised over."

Mr. Garbendyke looked very wise.

"I want *you* to tell me everything *you* can," he said in a low voice; "you may be sure I'll see that it's all right."

But at these comforting and, as it were, confidential words, an expression of vague alarm came into the old man's face. He backed onto his own door mat.

"Well, I don't like to be mistrusted," he mumbled, concealing, so it seemed to Garbendyke, some knowledge or other under an air of general grievance, and accentuating, as he spoke, his tone of feeble and petulant old age.

The Echo of Voices

Garbendyke's face assumed an expression of the most lively sympathy. He had no wish to frighten the old man away.

"Now that I've come," he murmured, "I think you'll find . . ."

"All very well, but who *are* you?" said the other quickly; "I've asked you that already."

"Oh, I'm looking into things in general. Mr. Whitelaw wanted my help. I'm a business man, you know — a jack-of-all-trades, so to speak."

"Hum!" said the old man rudely, "you look to me as if you hadn't been doing much business lately. I don't like it, I tell you. I'm a man who won't be tyrannised over. Don't you forget that, young man."

"No, don't go in," said Garbendyke hastily, seeing that the old man was about to shut the door in his face. "I think I understand what you mean — you fancy there's something — something queer going on in there" (he jerked his thumb over his shoulder).

He had to be careful not to endanger his position and yet he was full of curiosity.

"Good gracious me, don't you put words into my mouth," said the other in a frightened voice. And suddenly he added slyly, "What is one to think if one hears high words — one can put two and two together, I suppose."

The Would-Be Friends

Garbendyke had only time to ejaculate, "I can explain everything to you," when the little old man shut the door most unceremoniously in his face.

Garbendyke stood there for fully a minute quite motionless, then, taking up the can of milk, he went stealthily back into the flat. Whitelaw was still asleep (his snoring sounded louder than ever) and Garbendyke made straight for the kitchen and began to prepare breakfast. Finally, when this was ready and he had spread the table, he knocked boldly on Mr. Whitelaw's door and entered.

"Breakfast is ready, Mr. Whitelaw," he began in a cheeful voice, "I thought perhaps you would come and have it in your dressing-gown. Everything's nice and hot."

Mr. Whitelaw stared moodily at him from his bed.

"I hope it's cooked properly," he answered. "Not that I feel particularly hungry — however, thanks. I'll be with you at once."

Mr. Garbendyke went into the dining-room and immediately afterwards was joined by his host. Mr. Whitelaw had hastily shoved on a pair of old slippers and came out like that in his pink pajamas, with his hair all tousled and the bristles on his unshaved face giving him a soiled appearance. He huddled himself up in his chair and began to eat his breakfast without a word, yawning and scratching himself from time to time. But after he had finished

The Echo of Voices

it seemed to occur to him that he had better make himself pleasant to his guest.

"Capital," he said at last, "a capital breakfast! You've done well, Garbendyke. I'm apt to be a bit grumpy on Sunday mornings. You musn't mind that."

"Of course not, sir. You're tired naturally. I daresay you have to work late of a Saturday night?"

He smiled as innocuously as he could.

"Depends," said Mr. Whitelaw laconically.

Mr. Garbendyke smiled still more gaily.

"I say, Mr. Whitelaw," he remarked all at once, "do you ever attend the big book sales?"

"No, never."

"Oh, I see."

He nodded several times as though he had just made a remarkable discovery.

"Remember, Garbendyke, I don't like inuendoes," said the other slowly.

Mr. Garbendyke's expression suddenly became quite solemn.

"I assure you you are misunderstanding me," he replied. "It only struck me that we might develop that side. I wish you hadn't such ideas about me, Mr. Whitelaw."

He looked slightly crestfallen and aggrieved. But Mr. Whitelaw did not seem altogether satisfied. He got up and left the table.

The Would-Be Friends

A few minutes later when Garbendyke passed his door on the way to the kitchen he heard him moving inside his room. He was dressing.

Mr. Garbendyke spent almost an hour cleaning up. He felt in a contented mood and whistled several popular tunes in a subdued key. After a time he heard Mr. Whitelaw walk down the passage and go into his library. Presently he followed him there. He found him sitting at his table. He was examining a bundle of little books that he had just taken out of a parcel. He was working without zest, however, in a perfunctory, ruminating manner. The sight of Garbendyke appeared to awaken some unpleasant idea. He stared loweringly at him for an instant and then said:—

“Suppose you help me to look over these books.”

Garbendyke willingly assented. Probably he had a wish to impress Mr. Whitelaw favourably with his own knowledge. He began to dissertate upon the volumes that the other handed up to him, one at a time. He revealed that precise “inside” information so dear to the expert’s heart. Mr. Whitelaw was obviously impressed.

“Come, this is not so bad,” he said at length.

Garbendyke smiled faintly.

“I always said I should be useful to you,” he murmured.

“And so you will be,” answered Mr. Whitelaw

The Echo of Voices

heartily. "Let us both be reasonable in this matter and we'll make a big success of it." Then he added suddenly, in a rather uneasy tone. "By the way, what's this you say about attending the auctions?"

"Have you *never* attended auctions?" said Garbendyke in a singular voice.

Whitelaw, glancing up quickly, seemed to see the ghost of a smile on the white face of his new assistant. He did not answer immediately because he experienced all at once the sensation of standing upon the edge of a precipice. He leant forward with his head resting upon his outspread hands. A deep and ominous silence filled the room.

"That's the second time you've asked me that question," he muttered at last.

Garbendyke did not move but he gradually became even paler than before.

"Perhaps your memory is not very good," he answered slowly.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when Whitelaw leapt to his feet, overturning in his excitement his chair, which fell with a loud clatter upon a bundle of piled-up books. His face was fearfully inflamed with ungovernable rage. But he did not utter the shout that seemed ready to issue from his lips because, in the momentary pause following the noise, there was heard again the rapid opening of their neighbour's door and his abrupt, inquisitive steps on

The Would-Be Friends

the landing. Whitelaw made one dash for the entrance and darted out, leaving Garbendyke all alone. The little clerk tried to smile but it was broken by a strange shiver that ran through his body. A feeling of actual sickness caused him to pass his hands across his eyes. It was as much as he could do to remain standing upright. After a time he became astonished at the quietness outside and went cautiously to the door to listen as best he could. He did not dare to go further because he was sure that Mr. Whitelaw would burst into the flat at any instant. He could hear nothing at all, no raised voices, no steps — nothing. He was emboldened to creep to the outer door and put his ear to the key-hole. Two people were whispering on the landing. He could not make out what they were saying but he was suddenly overcome with panic and ran up the passage into his bedroom and bolted himself in.

He tried to remember what it was he had said to the old man ("He'll invent something for certain," he thought), but felt unable to recall things clearly. He was trembling very much and had to sit down on his bed. The look on Mr. Whitelaw's face still haunted his thoughts.

After what seemed to him a long interval he heard Mr. Whitelaw come back quietly into the flat and go into his room and then presently into his library. A look of hatred, fear, and avarice enlivened for an in-

The Echo of Voices

stant the expression of sombre gloom that had settled upon Garbendyke's face.

"He daren't touch me," he said to himself, "but I'll touch him all right."

At this feeble joke he grinned devilishly.

"I'll touch him all right," he repeated — "a clear thousand and out I go. Too much temper for me."

He got up and looked out of the window, stroking his chin and blinking in the sunlight.

"A thousand pounds," he murmured softly. "Does he guess, I wonder — curse him!"

His cockney cheek was beginning to conquer the craven fear of his heart. He felt extremely resentful. Who was Whitelaw to give himself such airs? A thief — an ordinary low thief! Blackguard! Well, he would show him!

He fumed up and down his tiny room, stamping on the floor. Best show that brute at once who was master here! After a few minutes of this he noisily opened the door and marched down the passage. He was slightly disconcerted at the dead silence that was all the greeting his determined attitude aroused. The library door was shut. He was about to fling it open, but on second thoughts he marched back, this time to the kitchen. It struck him that it would be a good idea to set about preparing dinner as though nothing had happened. Mr. Whitelaw had

The Would-Be Friends.

bought some steak on the previous evening and there was a sack of potatoes in the corner. Garbendyke got to work at once. He laid the table again and he cooked the dinner. Then in a loud, cheerful voice he called on Mr. Whitelaw to come along to the dining-room and have something, but Mr. Whitelaw did not respond though he must have heard because it was quite evident to Garbendyke that he was walking about his room. The little clerk did not repeat the invitation. The silence of the older man filled him with fury. He would like to have shouted through the key-hole, "Come out of it, you thief!" but caution kept him still. Without saying another word he went back to the dining-room and ate his own dinner. When he had finished he did not bother to clear away, but remained there thinking how best he should set about getting the thousand pounds. The great thing was to make Whitelaw realise what he knew without enraging him! A nasty, dangerous brute! "Like to suck him dry," he said to himself malevolently. How much had he already guessed? Evidently a good deal! Had he been pumping that old fool opposite? Well, he, Garbendyke, hadn't told *him* anything! — no, but, they invent, they imagine, they go lying and lying! He had a sudden desire to run very softly down the passage and escape from the flat. He had to pull himself together to repress a mad wave of terror

The Echo of Voices

that struck him like a blow. If only Whitelaw would come out into the open and show his hand! He got up from his chair and went softly to the library door. This time there was no sound within. He seemed almost to see Whitelaw sitting at his big table staring straight in front of him. And perhaps the little old man was waiting outside! He had a horrible sensation of being caught in a trap. By now it had begun to grow dark in the passage. Garbendyke's assurance, born in crowds and daylight, was fast melting. But like many low and cunning natures he had a taint of natural cruelty in him which he had never been able to gratify. He was the sort of man who would have committed unheard of ferocities in a revolution, but whose chance in life had made him merely cringing and malicious. He would have liked nothing better than to have got money out of Whitelaw by cruelty — by running a needle into him, for instance. Thoughts of making him go through some humiliating scene, a notion even of spitting in his face, flashed across his mind — thoughts mingled with terror. In such people the passions of hatred and revenge are generally intense, smouldering, and vicious. Garbendyke was no exception. It was these passions really which preserved his craven heart, these even more than avarice, from a counsel of flight. After he had waited for a few minutes he went back quietly into the dining-

The Would-Be Friends

room. It must have been later than he supposed because already the day was far gone. But it was still light enough for him to see to write down with a pencil stump on a half sheet of paper, "Mr. Whitelaw, please come and speak to me at once in the dining-room — I don't mean to stay here to-night." This he folded and marked "immediate" on the outside. Then going with it along the passage he shoved it under the library door, knocking loudly at the same instant. No sooner had he done this than, not waiting for any answer, he hurried quickly back into the dining-room and shut the door. He was basely alarmed at his own temerity and waited with feverish anxiety for any sound of Mr. Whitelaw's approach. But he waited in vain. There was no sound at all. He thought to himself, "It will all be over within ten minutes," but at the end of ten minutes he was still waiting. The darkness in the room had rapidly increased, but he did not get up to turn on the light. "Perhaps he's asleep," he said to himself. "Yes, he must be asleep," he repeated in a whisper. At that moment it seemed to him that there was a sound of faint, regular breathing just outside the door. He sprang to his feet and opened it with a swift movement. Facing him in the gloomy passage stood Mr. Whitelaw. Garbendyke uttered a cry.

"Excuse me, may I come in?" said Mr. White-

The Echo of Voices

law, speaking with mock and frosty politeness.

He did not wait for an answer but entered immediately.

"Well, you seem surprised to see me," he continued in the same tone, "but you asked me to come and here I am."

While he spoke Garbendyke had been darting wary and venomous looks at him. The recollection of how he had asserted himself over this scoundrel only yesterday, and how utterly he appeared to have lost that superiority filled him with rage. He was hardly listening to what the other had been saying, and was actually astonished to hear himself mutter, "You made no sound."

Mr. Whitelaw waived aside the remark.

"My dear fellow, you have some things yet to learn. That's a very old dodge — and a very useful one too."

Garbendyke did not say a word.

"Yes, a very useful one," proceeded the other; "perhaps if I had been more careful to use it last night it would have been better for us all — eh, Mr. — Mr. Garbendyke?"

"What do you mean by that?" said the little clerk, wetting his lip.

"I mean that you wouldn't have come prying on me then," answered Whitelaw very slowly.

Garbendyke seemed to be examining the carpet.

The Would-Be Friends

"I won't pretend to misunderstand you," he said at length. "You are no fool, Mr. Whitelaw."

"Yes, I am no fool," remarked his host. "Listen, Garbendyke! I have come to the conclusion that you and I will never be able to pull together unless we fully understand one another once and for all. Do you hear me? — once and for all. I positively will not have you spying on me or talking to that old man next door. Do you hear?"

Garbendyke smiled a very disagreeable and acid smile.

"As for the old man next door," he responded, "I can assure you he is much more inquisitive about you than I should ever be. I suppose he told you I was asking all sorts of questions. True enough — but only because I wanted to know how much *he* knew. He's one of those old men who need stopping — effectively."

Mr. Whitelaw suddenly sat down on a chair.

"You have a disgusting habit of inuendo," he said in a hoarse voice. "You are the vilest scum, Garbendyke — yes, the vilest!"

"You'll begin to shout presently, Mr. Whitelaw — please restrain yourself. You continue to misunderstand me. What have I said now? Nothing at all. However, let it pass. I wanted to remind you, Mr. Whitelaw, that — you — are — no — fool. Do you take me? For instance, you have got here, in this

The Echo of Voices

flat, something that it needed a very clever man to get. I've often wondered how things disappear at these big sales. Most astonishing! You are an able man, Mr. Whitelaw."

"What are you leading up to?" shouted the other all at once.

Garbendyke, terrified as he was, resolved to play his card.

"I want a thousand pounds from you — you, the thief of the Baldini manuscript from Perugia," he said in a threatening undertone.

Except for the very rapid flickering of his eyelids Mr. Whitelaw might have appeared not to have heard.

"I will not give you one penny," he said after a long pause, in a strange voice.

Garbendyke attempted to laugh but he felt oppressed.

"Don't play with me," he answered, and, curiously enough, he spoke almost imploringly, "you must give me a thousand pounds, I say."

Mr. Whitelaw got up, stretching his arms like a man waking from sleep.

"Not one penny," he muttered again in the same strange and mournful voice.

"Be reasonable, Mr. Whitelaw," murmured Garbendyke, as though appealing to his better nature.

The Would-Be Friends

Mr. Whitelaw suddenly laughed and as suddenly ceased.

"Very clever," he sneered; "we both seem to be able men, don't we?" and he repeated once again, "I won't give you one penny."

At these words Garbendyke, whose hesitation and uneasiness had been very obvious, seemed to make up his mind.

"Here, you hand me over that money or, damn you, you'll be somewhere else to-night!"

He expected a fearful outburst, but he was mistaken. Mr. Whitelaw merely considered him contemptuously, and asked, "And what guarantee have I that you would cease to trouble me?"

"Guarantee? I'll — I'll sign a paper. Besides, you don't suppose I'm going to be such a fool as to put my neck into this noose again, do you? Not much! Come, where's the cash?"

Mr. Whitelaw gazed steadily at him without replying. That look disconcerted the little clerk and made him bluster.

"Get along with you," he cried; "none of your tricks with me! I want my money — d'you hear? Shell out, you thief!"

Mr. Whitelaw had almost the appearance of a dreaming man. His eyes were dulled, his lips parted, and the faintest smile, as at some passing fancy, seemed to hover about his mouth.

The Echo of Voices

"I said 'once and for all,'" he whispered in a voice so deep and ominous that Garbendyke started back.

For a second he had the wild idea of flinging up the sash and shouting for the police, but then, summoning up all his oozing courage, he said, "Don't you attempt violence, Mr. Whitelaw — you had much better pay up."

He noticed with horrible alarm and for the first time that Mr. Whitelaw was carrying a heavy, ebony ruler which till now he had kept well out of sight.

"What's that? — don't attempt any violence, I say!" he exclaimed breathlessly.

It seemed to his terrified senses that Mr. Whitelaw was trying to conceal the ruler and that he was holding it furtively in his lowered palm.

"You're trying to hide that ruler," he cried suddenly; "I see it there in your hand! What do you want to hide it for?"

Mr. Whitelaw did not reply, but he took one quick step forward.

"My God, leave me alone!" yelled Garbendyke suddenly.

He experienced a dreadful intuition of evil. He darted towards the door and in another second was racing up the black passage of the flat. But all at once he tripped over a Gladstone bag, lying, fully packed, across his path, and fell heavily to the

The Would-Be Friends

ground. Dazed and bruised, he got to his feet and staggered towards the outer door. Fumbling in the dark, he seized the handle and attempted to open it. It resisted his efforts because it was locked and the key had been removed.

This discovery seemed to clear his brain. Trapped! A cold sweat broke out on his forehead as he remembered the bag — packed as though for a departure. He dared not call out for help. There was no time! He stood panting by the door, shaking the handle and trying to collect his thoughts. That monster would be on him any moment! All at once he took a frantic resolve. He began to walk slowly back up the passage, calling out as he did so, "Mr. Whitelaw, I give in. I don't want any money. Let me go. I ask for nothing. I give in; I give in."

He felt dizzy again and weakly despairing. He could have fallen, sobbing, at Mr. Whitelaw's feet.

"I give in; I give in," he quavered. "Where are you, Mr. Whitelaw?"

He was suddenly answered by an outlandish guffaw close at his elbow.

"Thank God!" he cried hysterically; "it's all right now!"

But his time had come. He was not able to say anything more because at that very instant he was struck down by a deadly blow behind the ear.

In the profound silence following the crash, the

The Echo of Voices

owner of the flat heard, outside, the eager, frightened steps of his next door neighbour. It caused him to frown. If it hadn't been for him — ah, it was too late to think of that! He knelt down by the prostrate form of the clerk and put his hand upon his heart. Then he slowly rose to his feet, trembling very much. Mr. Garbendyke, the optimist, would never indulge in blackmail again.

His murderer waited for a minute, listening for any further sound. Hearing nothing, he groped his way into the dining-room and drank half a tumbler of whiskey. Like many desperate and violent men, he had hardly realised as yet the enormity of his own deed. He forgot how carefully everything had been planned in the glow of righteous indignation that was still uppermost in his mind. But he did not attempt to turn on the lights. He was anxious to be gone. He was dressed as for a journey, and coming out of the dining-room he carefully picked up his bag, that contained, amongst other things, a priceless manuscript (lettered upon its binding of old red morocco, "*Horæ Beatæ Mariæ Virginis ad Usum Ecclesiæ Romanæ; cum calendario*") which had once reposed in a monastery at Perugia. He smiled grimly to himself at the thought that in another minute Mr. Whitelaw would have ceased to exist as completely, as mysteriously as his late assistant. The instinct of self-preservation, touched by some deep

The Would-Be Friends

emotion of terror, made him hasten. At the door he took a key from his pocket, softly let himself out and, turning, locked the door behind him. He seemed to breathe again. He was just about to dart down the stairs when he became aware of the little old man standing on his mat, regarding him with unwonted excitement and agitation.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he accosted him brusquely. "Was there ever any one like you for inquisitiveness? What do you want now — eh?"

"That noise — what was it?" said the old man huskily.

"Noise — why, that precious friend of yours, of course! Drunk as a lord! I told you this morning he must have been at it. But I've given him a bit of my mind. He won't cheek me again in a hurry."

He laughed savagely and then suddenly continued, "I say, thanks for your hint. I believe you *were* right. I really doubt whether he's honest. At any rate, I've given him the sack. You won't be troubled by him any more. Glad he didn't succeed in getting money out of you — very glad."

The old man gazed at him as though spell-bound.

"Why were you locking the door just now?" he said at length.

"Why the devil shouldn't I? Can't I lock my own door even? Will you try and mind your own business! It's always 'why? why? why?' with you. I

The Echo of Voices

believe you'd ask questions on the last day. Stop it, can't you? You're becoming a nuisance!"

The old man retreated backwards, his haggard and suspicious eyes fixed on Mr. Whitelaw.

"Don't tyrannise over me," he mumbled. "I don't believe you're telling me the truth — I believe you're concealing something. I'll speak to the porter."

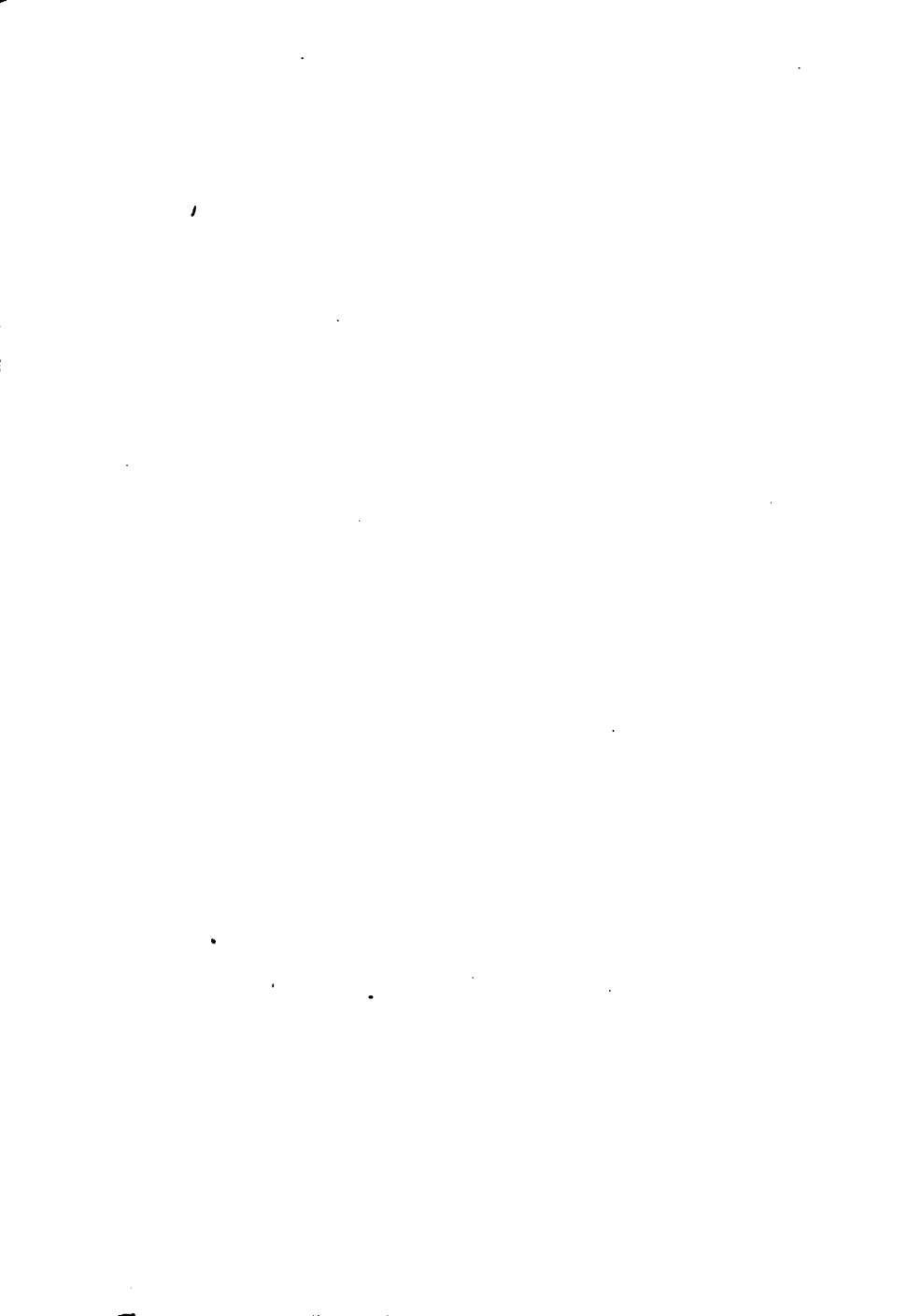
He made ready to bang his door in Mr. Whitelaw's face.

But Mr. Whitelaw suddenly began to roar with laughter.

"You're an old character!" he cried, beginning to descend the winding stairs, "an old scandal-monger! Don't you know that that fellow in there is one of my pals? I've been giving him a chance — not my fault if he took the bottle instead. Ha, ha, ha! Well, never say die! See you next week, I suppose. I forgive you for being a nuisance as you're a character. Get hold of another scandal, old cock! Keep's you young."

His words died away in a fit of laughing, growing fainter and fainter. The old man, dubious and frightened, returned to his flat and locked himself in, while the other, hailing a cab, tried to drown the memory of his would-be friend by remembering that Mr. Whitelaw, too, had ceased to exist, and that he was now Mr. Turner — forever.

GENERAL SERVICE



GENERAL SERVICE

WHEN she heard the drawing-room bell she did not immediately answer it but only turned up her nose, giving to her whole face an unpleasant and ill-tempered expression. (She was not really bad-looking but had been growing coarser lately, owing to her stoutness.) She sat alone in the kitchen in the cook's armchair which she had drawn up close to the blazing fire. Beside her on the dresser were the remains of a cup of tea and of several rounds of hot, buttered toast. She knew quite well that she ought not to eat this but she could never resist the temptation. If it *did* fatten her — what then? Hadn't she tried every kind of patent medicine and hadn't every one of them been useless? She was gaining weight every week. Even her face was getting shapeless now and she couldn't go upstairs without panting. She had been staring into the fire when her mistress' bell roused her out of her dreams. She sat up, breathing heavily and dejectedly.

"Suppose I must go now," she muttered, rising from her chair and yawning.

The Echo of Voices

Before leaving the room she smoothed her dress and assumed a prim and dignified look. She felt instinctively that this was the only thing that could carry off her appearance. Even to the cook she never unbent unless she was really irritated (which, to be sure, was rather frequently) and as for the people upstairs . . .

She opened the drawing-room door, stifling her gasps, and staring straight before her with her head well up.

"Yes, madam?" she enquired coolly. (She always said "madam" and not "ma'am"—it sounded more distant.)

Although she did not glance at her mistress she could tell at once by the way she was drumming on the table that she was in a petulant mood. She was an old lady of seventy who had a fixed idea that everything was going wrong and that her two servants were only prevented from carrying on intrigues with the tradesmen from fear of her wrath.

"Why did you not answer my bell at once, Grace?" she began.

"I was washing up the tea things, madam," answered Grace with the glibness of long practice.

"Oh, well, as long as you weren't wasting your time—but that's not what I rang for. I want to speak to you about yourself. I've been thinking of doing so for several weeks. Do you know that you

General Service

are losing your looks"—she hesitated—"your looks *and* your figure? Your appearance is not what it was."

"Indeed, madam."

The girl threw into her voice an icy fury of malice and rudeness. She had always hated her ("interfering old fool," as she called her), but really this was going a little too far! Moreover, it filled her with a sort of despair that the change should be so obvious.

"Yes, I speak for your own good. There is no necessity to show annoyance." There was a querulous acidity in the old lady's voice which was very disagreeable. "At your age it is most sad. I had hoped to see some improvement." She coughed discreetly. "Hoped very much. But really as things are—besides you are becoming so slow. I have not only myself to consider. There was a short pause. "I do hope you will always lead a moral life, Grace," she concluded, as she smoothed her dress.

For the first time since entering the room Grace looked her mistress full in the face.

"Are you giving me notice, madam?" she enquired insolently.

"I am, Grace, and I am very sorry to see that your manners have deteriorated. A most painful alteration—most painful. I am afraid there can be no question of a reference." Observing that her

The Echo of Voices

servant did not flinch, she added condescendingly, "However, I will think it over. When the time comes you may ask me again."

"I have not asked you once yet, madam," said Grace.

The old lady's lip trembled with rage.

"I dismiss you for impertinence!" she screamed. "Go at once! And not a penny do you get!"

"I must have my month's wages, madam," replied Grace with ominous calm.

"No, not a penny!" repeated the old lady, shaking like a leaf.

"Then I shall have to County-Court you, madam," remarked Grace with cynical familiarity.

"At once, do you hear, leave the room!" cried the old lady.

"Certainly, madam," observed the imperturbable Grace. "And perhaps you will be so good as to have my money sent down to the kitchen. I shall go this evening." She gave a short laugh. "And I hope you will be better suited by your new servant and — and suit her better."

Without waiting for a reply she walked out of the room. But her calm was only artificial because she was no sooner back in the kitchen than she gave way to hysterical weeping. After a time she went to the glass to rearrange her hair which was beginning to get into her eyes. She sighed deeply at her appear-

General Service

ance. Then she went into the miserable little room in which she slept and began to pack her box. Her clothing consisted mostly of "finery"—on which she had spent much of her wages since she had given up buying patent medicines. She arrayed it out on the bed. It cheered her to see it like that, conjuring before her mind, as it did, all sorts of thrilling adventures. For several minutes she surveyed the bed with a complacent and satisfied air. . . . But then again the thought of her misfortunes came uppermost and she could not restrain her tears. . . .

When the cook returned she found Grace sitting, red-eyed and defiant, before her tin trunk.

"Well, I declare!" she ejaculated.

She began to question her closely. But Grace had no inclination to be "drawn" and only snapped in reply, "It's the old cat upstairs; you can ask her."

Throwing up her hands, the cook gave way to several wondering exclamations. But she kept discreetly to herself that she had been trying to undermine Grace's position with her mistress for some time past. She disliked the girl's "superior" manner.

Grace, in spite of her temperament, felt so forlorn that she almost allowed herself to make a *confidante* of the cook, which, of course, would have resulted in her weeping copiously in her arms, but it suddenly occurred to her that the other's astonishment was overdone, and at that all her aloofness was redoubled.

The Echo of Voices

"Indeed, are you surprised?" she remarked ironically. "I should have thought you knew her ways by now."

At that very instant the bell upstairs rang out again.

"You can answer it," said Grace; "I'm not going near her."

The cook would certainly have declined to do anything of that sort had she not been consumed by curiosity.

"All right, Grace," she replied loftily, "and I hope you will be sorry for what you have just said."

After about five minutes she returned with an extremely irritating and mysterious smile on her lips.

"This is for you, Grace," she said, handing her an envelope in which were two pounds (her month's wages) and a tract concerning the dangers awaiting girls in the London streets. Grace took it from her hand, wrapt the money in her handkerchief, and threw the tract into the fire.

"Well, of all the ungrateful girls!" cried the cook.

"Don't be a fool," said Grace, rising. "I must go and get a cab now."

The cook eyed her malevolently. "But, of course," she continued as though unaware of offence,

General Service

"of course, with your appearance, Grace, you won't be under such temptations. That's what comforts me."

Grace had just sufficient control of her temper not to bang the door behind her.

It was still snowing outside and the snow was turning into slush in the salted streets. A chill wind was blowing up from the river. She shivered as she stood on the pavement whistling for a four-wheeler, but it was more with rage and despair than with actual cold.

Presently an old battered cab came staggering up out of the darkness. The driver, muffled in a huge ulster, gazed stolidly down at her.

"You want a cab, miss?" he muttered incredulously.

"Yes, it's for myself. Could you help me to carry my box?"

Without a word he got down and went with her into the area.

The cook pretended to ignore their existence and continued over her work with a severe expression. The cabman gave her one long stare and then hoisted up the box, and went forth in silence. Grace, after a final glance round her room, followed him. It had been her home for three years — she would see it no more.

When she reached the street again the cabman had

The Echo of Voices

already remounted and her box was on the roof. It seemed to her heated imagination that he must have been there all the time, because he was gazing down at her with just that same stolid look which he had given her when he first drew up. But instead of asking her whether she wanted a cab he mumbled thickly, "Where to, miss?"

Where to, indeed! For the first time the bare reality of her position flashed before her. Where to? Why, nowhere! Where could she go? "What brutes people are!" she whispered inaudibly. She felt a great pity for herself, an abounding and tragic pity. She could have screamed. But after a momentary pause she replied calmly, "Drive towards Westminster, please — I'll tell you where to in a few minutes."

They began to drive slowly along the Embankment. She felt cold in the cab and the noiselessness oppressed her. Besides, the refrain kept rolling in her head, "Where to? Where to?" "Oh, what shall I do?" she murmured distractedly. She remembered hearing something about servants' homes, but at the mere notion she gave a contemptuous toss of her head. "More tracts," she thought, dismissing the idea at once. But she must think of *some* place. The cabman would be wondering, and then the expense — but where, where? She counted her money — three pounds and four shillings.

General Service

So softly had the cab been travelling over the snow that she had not noticed it stopping. She was greatly startled to see the cabman's head thrust through the door.

"Excuse me, miss," he asked bluntly, "but have you made up your mind yet?"

"Well, no, I haven't," she answered awkwardly; "that's to say, not altogether."

"Then you aren't going to no situation? — now I thought you wasn't." A gloomy satisfaction showed itself in his voice.

Grace made a gesture of indifference.

"I can go anywhere I like," she said, bridleing a little.

"Yes, but where *are* you going?" insisted the cabman.

That same question again! Where *was* she going — where? She looked at him blankly, shaking her head.

"Well, miss, excuse me for speakin', but there's my wife now — down Pimlico way — she's got a room, if you was to think of it."

Grace's expression lit up with an air of genuine pleasure.

"No, really and truly — she would take me in?" she exclaimed. "That is good. Just for a few days till I can settle my plans." (She could not avoid this hint of importance.) "Yes, it would be

The Echo of Voices

very convenient." She looked rather shy. "Very convenient," she added hastily. "I must thank you. It's kind of you."

In a short time they drew up in a little dark street and the cabman jumped down and dived along a narrow passage.

Presently he returned, lifted her box, and asked her to follow him. His house was at the end of the passage, which smelt more strongly at every step. She was ushered into a small room in which stood, very bolt upright, an elderly, thin woman of the same sort of type as her late mistress. She was one of those women who invariably wear black and whose every glance expresses a tacit disapproval of any conceivable action.

"Good evening to you," she said. "My husband tells me that you want a room."

Grace's antagonism was at once aroused.

"I do want a room but it's only for a few nights," she answered. "I can pay well for it and in advance, too, if you like."

For answer she got a shrug of the shoulders.

"You'd best come with me," said the cabman, starting up from the fire.

It was dark on the staircase and she followed him as well as she could. Her room was an attic one with a sloping roof and damp walls. It had an aspect of the most complete squalor and dreariness and was lit

General Service

by a single candle. The cabman placed her box on the floor.

"Pooh, it ain't much of a place after all," he observed sheepishly. "Still . . ." He rubbed his nose. "I say, miss, could you pay me for the cab?" he added quickly. "My old woman's a bit graspin'. She's built that way. It'll be two shillin's for the cab." He winked. "She'd stick it on the bill," he whispered in a hoarse undertone, "and where should I be then? Er, tell me that?"

Grace gave him the two shillings without a word.

As soon as she was alone she sat down on the edge of the bed and allowed her hands to fall helplessly into her lap. This was romance! She made a sign of disgust. What an awful place, what awful people! ("The man's a fraud, too," she said to herself.) She felt that her dignity had suffered an outrage. But at length she rose and began to unpack her box. Without voicing it to herself she had already made her plans for the evening. She knew some shop-assistants. . . . She had got to know them several years before at the skating-rink. She had gone there because she thought the exercise would keep her slim—vain hope! She was pretty then and they had been in the habit of treating her—latterly she had had to treat them. They had even tried to shake her off but she had clung to them with desperation. She used to buy threepenny seats for

The Echo of Voices

them at the Cinema and provide them with beer. She called them her "boys" (there were two of them), and though they were selfish, drunken, heartless and stupid, she had woven a sort of romance round them. This evening she meant to dazzle them as she had never dazzled them before. Piece by piece she took out her "finery." . . .

When at length she surveyed herself in the cracked and blotchy glass she could not help smiling. She dabbed touches of powder on her pale cheeks. Good! What would her boys think of her to-night? And she would have to treat them well, too! Yes, indeed! They were apt to be a little "difficult" nowadays.

She was just counting over her money again, calculating how much she could afford to spend, when the cabman's wife entered the room. She caught sight of the gold lying in the open handkerchief and her eyes glittered. Then, observing the appearance of the girl, she compressed her mouth.

"Are you going out to-night?" she asked grimly.

"Certainly I am," said Grace without looking round.

"Oh, indeed! Well, I will trouble you to pay in advance as you suggested. One week's board and lodging, fifteen shillings; and you may add two and sixpence for the price of the cab."

Grace restrained her rising indignation.

General Service

"I paid your husband two shillings exactly for the cab," she said with emphasis. "And about the other thing, I'm not going to be here a week. I'll give you seven and six for half a week."

"No, miss, you must give me the whole of the fifteen shillings or I can't keep you. As to the cab," she added venomously, "allow me to say that I know a good many things my husband doesn't." This rather vague retort seemed to give her a sense of triumph. She looked sternly round on the "finery" strewn on the bed and covering Grace herself. "And what's more," she continued, "you must understand that I am a respectable woman."

"I don't follow you," said Grace stiffly. "However, I won't bandy words with you," (this was a favourite expression of her late mistress) "— here's your fifteen shillings. And now please let me have a latch-key."

"Latch-key, indeed!" exclaimed the other. "That's a fine word! And pray, what should I be doing with latch-keys?" (She attempted to mimic Grace's accent.) "No nonsense of that sort in *my* house. You can knock at the door like other people. If it's to hide your coming in late, all I can say is — all I can say is that you'd better not begin that sort of thing here."

Grace was almost speechless with anger. "You

The Echo of Voices

— you won't gain anything by insults," she almost sobbed. "Leave me to myself, please!"

With a sour smile on her lips the cabman's wife went slowly out of the room.

Although she was so furious Grace understood at once that there must be some sort of jealousy at work in the heart of the wife. She curled her lip. What a fool the woman was! Fancy thinking that she would "carry on" with a cabman! Bah!

She waited for a few minutes, then tip-toed downstairs, and ran out into the alley. It had stopped snowing by now and the wind seemed to be lessening. She had thrown a thick coat round her and she wore a pair of goloshes over her fanciful shoes. In a lighted thoroughfare not far from the Embankment, somewhere behind Victoria Station, she jumped on to a 'bus and in less than twenty minutes had reached her destination. It was a public-house in a side street, one of those public-houses that do a discreet and regular business with a class of men who never seem to be quite sober and who always live "just round the corner." She hesitated for an instant outside, then, seeing that no one was in sight, she slipped in.

As she had expected, her two "boys" were sitting in a corner of the bar, drinking beer. They were undersized young men with spotty complexions and thin, sandy moustaches. One of them had warts

General Service

on his fingers. They greeted her without effusion, indeed with a certain disgust, but as she immediately ordered them more drink they began to be slightly mollified. She addressed them as Herb and Alf in tones of solicitude and endearment. Were they cold, would they like something to eat, had the manager been nagging again, and so on, and so on? Herb and Alf were sulky, answered by grunts and monosyllables, didn't see "why folk couldn't leave them alone," etc. She took no notice of all this. They accepted her gifts with grudging condescension — still, they accepted them. That was always something. Presently they became more talkative, inveighing graphically against the hardness of their lives. She listened with sympathy.

"I wish I could help you more," she murmured, feeling a wonderful and disinterested tenderness in her heart.

They laughed unrestrainedly.

"D'yer 'ear that, Alf?" said Herb, digging him in the ribs.

Alf chuckled.

She looked from one to the other of them with tears in her eyes.

"I do mean it," she said earnestly, "if you would only believe me sometimes! Why don't you? It's all true — oh, it is!" Then changing her tone she added, "Look, I've put on some good clothes — I

The Echo of Voices

thought you might like sixpenny seats this cold night." She opened her handkerchief and showed them the contents. "That's not so bad, is it?"

"You're a lucky girl, Grace," said Alf. "Poor devils like us don't 'andle cash like that, do we 'Erb?"

"That we don't!" replied Herb. "You can't think what our life is, Grace — it's 'ell!"

"And look at 'er dress," continued Alf rhetorically (she had opened her coat as though unintentionally). "There's money for yer! There's taste, 'Erb!"

The "girl" behind the bar, a woman of about forty-five with bright yellow hair, the complexion of a corpse, and an impossible pearl necklace, suddenly giggled and then began dusting the bottles with great energy.

"Don't yer mind 'er, Grace," said Alf generously.

"I'm only thinking of you. I want you to have a good time," answered Grace, smiling painfully.

The two shop assistants exchanged glances.

"Won't you come to the Cinema now?" she added. "We could have a rare evening — you know you'd like it."

"Our boots ain't any too good," replied Herb sadly; "and in this wet . . . they're leaky."

Grace was thunderstruck.

"Do you mean to say," she cried breathlessly,

General Service

"that you haven't got proper boots? No, that's too awful! Here, take this—take this money! Here's a half sovereign for you and Alf; buy new boots with it."

She had lost all thought of herself. It never occurred to her to tell them of her own misfortunes. Her pity for herself had been swallowed up in the deep pity she felt for these two men. At heart she realised that they laughed at her and despised her, but still they were all she had and she loved them. It was not love in the ordinary sense—she knew it was hopeless to think of that—it was a sort of maternal devotion. She was older than they. If she could only protect them a little, ever so little! Her eyes flashed.

"Take it, Herb," she said, thrusting the ten-shilling bit into his hand, "and if it's not enough, why you just tell me?"

Herb took it as though regretting the necessity. He looked particularly sly at that moment.

"You're a pal, you are," he muttered, shifting on his feet—"here, Alf, d'yer know where a bloke can buy two pairs of boots for ten shillings?"

The barmaid, who was watching the scene with languid enjoyment, suddenly gave an artificial laugh.

"You are cautious, you two," she simpered, "why can't you leave the poor gal alone?" Then address-

The Echo of Voices

ing the air in general, she added, "It's really too absurd." She had evidently an educated sense of humour.

Grace felt herself growing hot all over.

"Of course it isn't enough," she murmured hurriedly. "Take this pound instead." She smiled bravely at them. "Look at *my* lovely shoes!" she continued, blushing a little as she kicked off her goloshes.

"Hum — don't suppose you got them for nothink," observed Alf critically, cocking his eye at the barmaid.

"That I didn't. They cost me twelve-and-six. I thought you'd like them, Alf."

All four people in the bar suddenly began to laugh. But with Grace it was as near to weeping as possible.

"Do come now," she urged. "It's getting late. You won't see the whole programme if you keep sitting here."

The young men rose unwillingly.

"Are you really going, gentlemen?" asked the barmaid in a supercilious and smirking voice.

"Well, are we, Alf?" said Herb, ignoring the glances of the servant.

"May be yes, may be no," replied Alf. "It's a — night outside."

"Do, do come!" said Grace.

General Service

"I ain't got no proper paints," objected Alf, shivering realistically.

"No, nor I neither," chimed in Herb, chattering his teeth.

The barmaid went into such convulsions that she had hastily to retire into the back room.

Grace snatched her opportunity.

"I'll make all that right if you'll only come," she whispered vehemently. "Don't let that girl laugh at me any more, Alf." She touched him on the shoulder. "Oh, do come!" she added in piteous agitation.

They little knew (and, as a matter of fact, would not have cared at all to know) what it had cost her to humble herself in the presence of that woman. They were regarding her with an air of distaste, uncertainty, and greed.

"What'll yer make right?" said Herb with brutal frankness.

She knew what they meant. She thought suddenly, "They'll leave me with nothing," but she answered at once, "Why, about the underclothing — I'll give you money to buy some."

"Oh," said Herb with a faint tinge of embarrassment, "that's you all over, Grace." He prodded Alf in the ribs. "What have yer got to say, Alf? 'Aven't I always told yer as 'ow Grace was kind-earted?"

The Echo of Voices

The two precious friends nodded sagely. At the same instant the barmaid returned with a more or less composed face.

"Look here, Alf," whispered Grace desperately, "if you and Herb come now — now, at this moment — I'll give you another ten shillings."

"What, still here, gentlemen!" observed the barmaid in a tone of polite surprise.

"You hold your tongue!" shouted the gallant Alf.

"Make it a quid," he muttered, turning to Grace and looking balefully at her. Herb was scowling.

"All right, only come!" she implored, and stooping down she fastened on her goloshes, then, pulling her coat closely round her, she ran out of the bar.

It had begun to snow again. She stood in the protection of the porch, waiting for the two men. Suddenly she heard a peal of laughter from the three people inside, then a loud "Hush!" then silence, followed by whispers.

She shut her eyes, trembling all over.

A minute later the two men reeled outside.

"Where's that quid?" asked Herb at once, in a tone of great determination.

She pressed it into his hands.

Without so much as thanking her he half-opened the door again and called through, "Ye'r wrong — I've got it."

General Service

She took them one by each arm and literally dragged them into the road.

"No, yer don't, Grace," said Herb, breaking free and gazing at her with tipsy disapproval. "Yer — ! Alf and me don't allow no liberties."

"No, should say not," echoed the virtuous Alf, wrenching himself free on his part.

The night air had muddled their already sodden minds. They stared at her with inflamed eyes, breathing horribly of beer.

"Don't yer try no tricks on with us, Grace," said Alf, "we aren't on the loose; and if we was you aren't the sort — not by a long chalk."

Grace looked at them with despair.

"You're not coming to the Cinema?" she stammered incredulously. Then flaring up she shouted all at once, "You know quite well that I'm not that sort of girl. How can you treat me like this! Haven't I given you everything I have almost! Haven't I done everything I can!"

She burst into tears.

The sight of her grief caused a wave of sentimentalism to dim the eyes of the two drunkards. It might equally have caused them to kick her.

"Don't take on so," mumbled Herb, sniffing. "We wouldn't harm 'er, would we, Alf?"

Alf was much moved.

"That we wouldn't," he hiccoughed. "But don't

The Echo of Voices

talk no more about Cinemas, Grace. Them's places of sin. We're going back 'ome, 'Erb and me."

(They "lived in," as it is called.)

Grace suddenly smiled.

"Then I'll walk with you," she said. "It's good to hear you talk kindly, my dears."

They looked owlshly at her.

"Don't yer lead us into no temptations, Grace," observed Alf reprovingly.

She laughed.

"Here, you take hold of my arms," she replied; "you take one, Herb, and you the other, Alf."

Thus, romantically entwined, they proceeded down the street. They walked unsteadily for a very obvious reason and as they walked the two shop assistants wept for their past wickednesses. They recalled their mothers with fervour, they offered up vows of a dramatic and stringent nature. Naturally, this mood did not continue long. The shop was distant some way and before they reached it they had passed out of the penitent stage into one of active quarrelsomeness. They wanted to know why the — — — they should be walking about with this — — "Talk about fat women in a show!" muttered Alf with resentment. Herb laughed spitefully. Their anger was sincere but maudlin. They cursed Grace, each other, their employer, the whole world, with complete impartiality. They

General Service

wanted to pick quarrels with every one they met, they wanted to enter every bar.

Grace never answered them back but only guided their steps and kept them firmly on the move. Her heart sank within her but her outward dignity had reasserted itself in the open streets and she resembled some avenging deity bearing off two drunkards to retribution. Her companions began to sing a foolish song about "A last farewell beneath the rising moon." It touched their imaginations anew and they wept, waving time with their free arms. A policeman warned them that they would find themselves in the station if they didn't "dry up." He evidently took Grace for the ring-leader and his look of personal, as apart from professional, disapproval was meant to convey his opinion of *her* motives. This warning sobered Herb and Alf and they were able to approach the shop (a huge, gloomy, shuttered building) in a more subdued state. Several of the other assistants now made their appearance and at this sight the two shook off Grace and ran to join them. Hardly knowing what she was doing, she followed behind. At the little side door of the shop all the men stopped for a last drunken argument. Ill at ease Herb and Alf kept glancing round, only to see with dismay that the woman they hated — this ghastly shadow, this "old man of the sea" — was standing a few yards off. They beck-

The Echo of Voices

oned her away with cautious and violent gestures, they frowned with contorted faces. But she did not move. She stood gazing at them with a dumb and hopeless look. Soon every one began to notice her and to chaff Herb and Alf, who would willingly have strangled her at that moment. An obscene expression passed round the group, an expression repeated loudly and shamelessly and with several variations. She flushed and then went deadly pale. But like some fascinated animal she remained rooted to the spot, staring at them with wide open eyes. All at once an idea seemed to strike Alf and he went up to Herb and whispered in his ear. Both of them began to laugh as tipsy men laugh, without a sound, aimlessly, idiotically. This continued for fully a minute, whilst the other men gathered round them and jeered. When they had mastered themselves a little the two whispered, in turn, to the whole group. Then with supernaturally grave faces Herb and Alf stepped over to Grace and said solemnly, "Grace, we've got some pals 'ere whose boots ain't no better nor ours, and as for their pants — why, you can guess — can yer give us anythink for them?"

Without a word she took out all her remaining money and handed it over.

She did not speak to them because she knew that it would be worse than useless. Besides — what did

General Service

it matter? It was all over. She had suffered too much. She turned on her heel and walked slowly away. The echo of their insulting laughter reached her faintly. She shuddered and increasing her speed into one of nervous haste she hurried from them into the shelter of the darkness.

She had been walking for a long time before she suddenly realised that she was nearing Pimlico again. Strangely enough she no longer felt at all cold, although it was freezing hard. Her lethargy had given way to an unnamed excitement. She kept repeating to herself, "I have no money now." But outwardly she was as self-contained as she had been in the drawing-room of her late mistress. Her sacrifice of dignity had not humbled her spirit. Her sense of shame, which had been swamped by her pity, had all revived. She saw her "boys" at last quite clearly. "They took everything I had to give," she said to herself. And it was not as if they had ever really been the heroes of her dreams. The very thought made her smile disdainfully. "What ears they have!" she murmured, going over their features one by one. She blushed crimson at the memory of the night. "They took everything — no pity," she thought again. She was completely disillusioned, but she was not comforted. She walked swiftly on, looking neither to right nor left. No, she was not comforted. "I haven't a penny left," she muttered

The Echo of Voices

all at once in an astonished undertone. The idea seemed to smite her afresh. Then she recalled the cabman's wife. What would *she* say? She stopped to reflect. Ah, there was only one thing certain! — she musn't go back. "I knew when I gave it them," she whispered, as though a window had opened in her mind. "Never," she pronounced aloud. That alone was certain. She looked about her. "Why not end all this?" she thought. It was so natural an idea that it did not occur to her to summon up self-pity. "This is how it happens," she continued, remembering various stories she had heard or read: "like this or this. Yes. And so down they go — and why not?"

"Better end it all," she thought again.

A man who had been watching her for the last minute or two suddenly came close up and looked at her intently. He had a sniggering, tipsy, and depraved face and he walked continually on his toes.

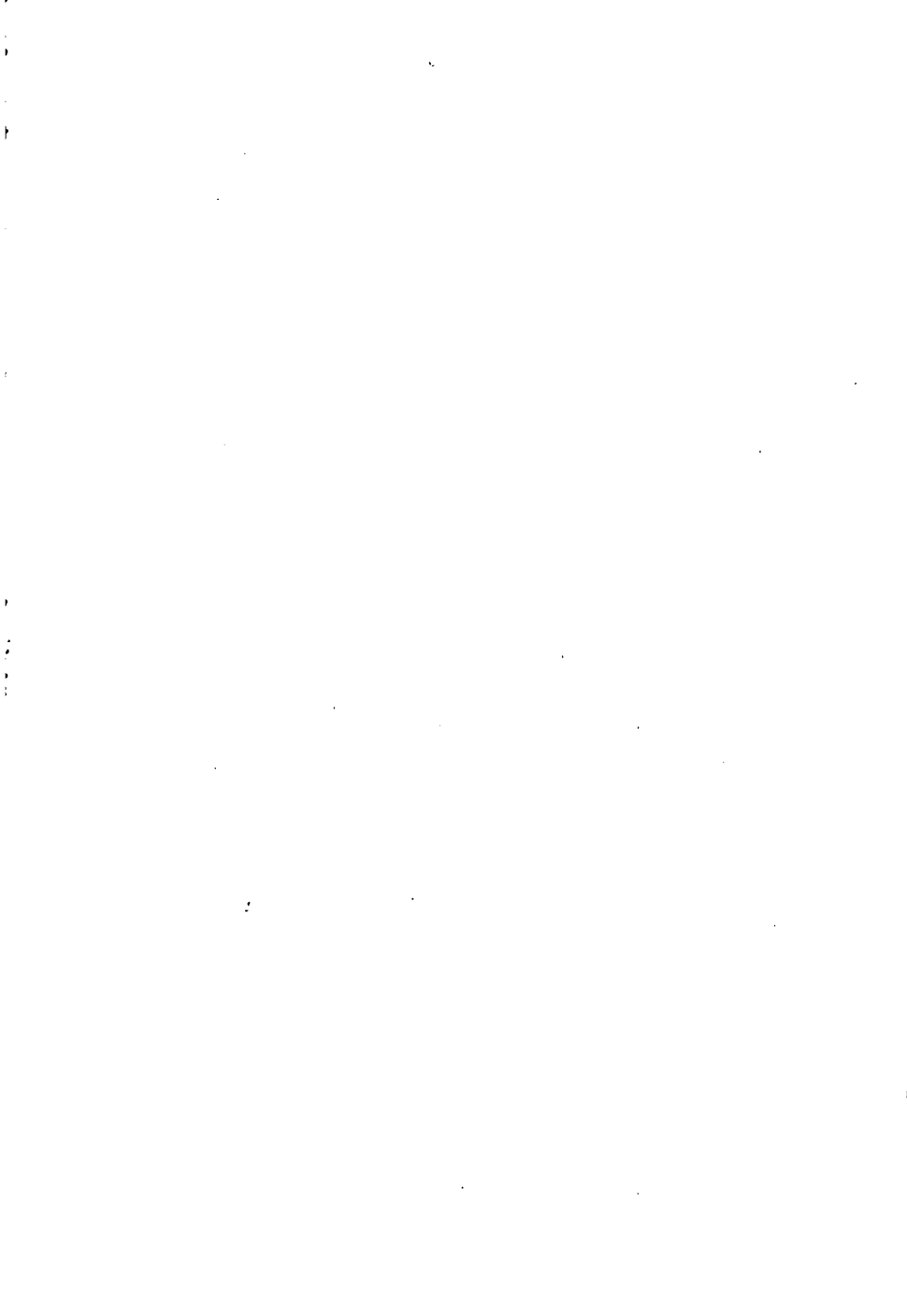
"Are you — going home?" he asked in an unmistakable voice.

She turned haughtily from him and began to run towards the river. Her excitement was growing more intense. "Wait — what is it?" she thought, stopping and staring at the ground. "Why, of course!" she muttered. It was all plain. "Plenty of girls before me," she muttered, and she began to move on again. The melting snow on the parapets

General Service

had frozen into cat's ice that crunched beneath her elbows as she leant on it. The tide had turned and was setting towards the sea. And she thought all at once, "Suppose I'm too fat to sink and only bob up and down, dying from cold." The river, swollen by the winter floods, flowed onwards, gurgling into eddies and waves. She tried to think of what she was going to do. A strange gleam of tenderness irradiated her heart and she seemed to experience once more every happy and unselfish emotion of her life. Instinctively she began pulling the pins out of her hair, letting it fall about her in a tangled mass. This action released her, as it were, from all her past. It was as symbolic as is the desire of dying people to bathe their hands in cold water.

Closing her eyes tightly she clambered onto the parapet. She felt so dizzy that she could scarcely realise anything, but, knowing that all was finished, she left herself fall, rather than threw herself, into the river. She cried out once in terror — a cry drowned by the wind. The water closed over her immediately and in the gloom of the deep night not even the bubbles of her expiring breath appeared for an instant upon the angry surface.



MONSIEUR CLAVEL

MONSIEUR CLAVEL

WHEN I was a boy at school I always looked forward to the lesson under Monsieur Clavel. So did every one. As he was a Frenchman, we naturally considered him an extremely ridiculous person. He was a small man with an enormous head, coarse features, and little, twinkling eyes. He had one of these confidential and irritable natures that have a fascination for schoolboys — one never knew quite how far one could go with him. He was a colonial, altogether out of sympathy with the Republic, and was very fond of talking about his home in Guadaloupe. I remember the air of content with which he would watch us assemble and the sudden gesture by which he would enjoin silence. He used to give us dictation from *La Fontaine* or *Florian*. "*Un toup n'avait que les os et la peau,*" he would begin, speaking in a resolute voice and smiling at us in an extraordinary satisfied and knowing way. He liked to see his class interested and therefore he approved of questions. Our only idea being to get as much fun out of the hour as possible we invariably abused his good nature. We had a regular plan of questions by

The Echo of Voices

which he should be led back to tell us of his early life. After three or four lines of dictation some one would ask him a simple thing like, "When was La Fontaine born, sir?" That was the sort of interruption that delighted Monsieur Clavel. He would stop his dictation to cast a long, quizzical look at the speaker and then with a sweep of his hand he would, as it were, gather us round him. He was never tired of dilating upon the reign of Louis XIV, the Hôtel de Rambouillet, Molière, Bossuet, Racine, and so on. It was the Golden Age for him. I believe he really fancied we were interested in it, too — we weren't. Presently some one would ask, "Were your family living in Paris then, sir?"

Monsieur Clavel would answer, "No, my family comes from the South."

"But you weren't born in the South of France, were you, sir?"

A question such as this would visibly affect Monsieur Clavel.

"No more talking, we will continue with the dictation," he would exclaim wrathfully.

But after another sentence he would generally go up to the boy who had asked the question and say in a tone of jocular melancholy, "So you want to know about my family, do you?" That was a sign for every one to stop writing, and to lean forward with an air of expectancy.

Monsieur Clavel

"Yes, sir, please."

Monsieur Clavel would give a swift, suspicious glance round the room and would enquire abruptly, "You've heard of the Revolution?"

"Oh, yes, sir, we have," every one would murmur in a tone of horror.

This manifest sympathy seemed to soften Monsieur Clavel's heart. He would smile kindly and give the nearest boy a pinch on the ear (like Napoleon — whom he greatly despised), as he said, "Our family were Royalists *émigrés*."

Excited questions would greet this remark.

"Were they guillotined, sir?" "Did they dress up in disguises, sir?" "What happened to them, then, sir?" "Did they escape to London, sir?" and so on.

Monsieur Clavel would hold up his hand.

"Silence!" he would shout, looking balefully at the form, "take your pens: I'm going to dictate again."

And above the scratching of the nibs you could hear his guttural voice, "*L'attaquer, le mettre en quartiers.*"

It was about now that the real adventures of the hour used to start. If you played him well he would tell you all about his family's escape to Trinidad and finally to Guadeloupe and he would even go on to tell you about his own boyhood in that island, but if you

The Echo of Voices

played him badly you would get at least two hundred lines. He needed to be a bold and skilful angler who would tackle Monsieur Clavel when the storm signal was once hoisted. I remember many an encounter, both fortunate and unfortunate.

The danger was that Monsieur Clavel's temperament varied from hour to hour. He was subject to sudden fits of reserve and suspicion and even in his most expansive moments he might turn and rend you. I have never seen a man who could be so friendly and so severe in the same lesson. I think he was always having to recollect that he was a schoolmaster — moreover he would stand no direct impertinence.

I knew nothing of his personal affairs at that time. Boys don't think of that kind of thing. They look upon a master either as a fool or a hero — I mean an English master — and they look upon a French master as an obvious butt. What else is he there for? . . .

Monsieur Clavel had been at the school a great many years when I came, and he was still there just the same when I left five years later. The younger boys were still "having him on" about La Fontaine but we elder boys used to read Molière with him in an atmosphere of genial intellectuality. It was in these later years that I first began to get a glimpse of his true self. This fat, ugly little man had some-

Monsieur Clavel

thing in him which I had seen in no one else. I don't think I could have explained it then but I felt instinctively that it was some rare quality which ridicule would not touch. The impression was a half-unconscious one built up by a hundred trifles. I remember waiting behind one day to tell him that I had heard from my father saying that he had been in sight of Guadeloupe on his way from Martinique to Porto Rico. Monsieur Clavel was vastly pleased. He took me by the arm as though I were a man of the world.

"So he saw my home — I'm very glad. I mean to go back there one of these days — for always. You are a good fellow. You must come and have tea with me one afternoon."

He let go my arm and went quickly over to his desk with his short, podgy steps.

"I will show you a picture of my home," he said, and he produced from underneath his papers a faded photograph of a white-washed, verandahed house set amidst tropical palms.

He didn't say another word but held it up to me in triumph. I hardly looked at it because I was thinking of the way in which he had said "for always." Even to a boy of eighteen there can be horizons in the sudden tone of a voice. I remember muttering some words of admiration and leaving the room. As I went out of the door I saw him standing

The Echo of Voices

by his desk, a grotesque gargoyle of a figure in the severe dreariness of the class-room. It has stuck in my memory ever since. He looked out of place, forlorn, lonely, and, yes, would you believe it, almost romantic. I wonder whether I really thought that then or whether I've built it round his name since. Hard to say. Impossible to say.

I did not go to tea with him because it was then nearly the end of my last term, but from that day onwards I thought a good deal about Monsieur Clavel. He seemed full of possibilities. I found myself repeating the word, "Guadeloupe," as though it had some mystical significance. Wasn't he going back there to live "for always"! What a curious old fellow!

You must not suppose that these ruminations outlasted the term. That's not the way a young man is made. Once I had left school I promptly put it all out of my mind — didn't think of Monsieur Clavel once in six months. In fact, I'm not sure whether I ever thought of him again till nearly two years later when I had a letter from my young brother telling me that "Old Clavel is not here this term; he's gone off to Guadeloupe on a visit — the old fool." By George! old Clavel at Guadeloupe! How it brought it all back! I sat down there and then and thought about him for five minutes. But he had passed too completely out of my life for long remembrance. I

Monsieur Clavel

even forgot to ask my brother what Monsieur Clavel had said when he returned. I should probably have got nothing out of him because he had the profoundest contempt for the French master. He was a new boy.

Two years after this, when I had been four years away from school and was just beginning to talk like a man of fifty, I went to stay for a week-end with my old house-master. I alighted at the station in a very exalted mood, resolved to impress every one back there to live "for always!" What a curious article on *The Pletad* which was, of course, shockingly bad, and of which I was ridiculously proud. I had brought a copy with me, not to show to my old house-master (who had a sarcastic way with him that I remembered clearly) but to show to Monsieur Clavel — that lover of the French Classics. I was too deeply interested in myself to think of Monsieur Clavel apart from what he would think of me, so it was with a purely selfish emotion that I knocked at his door that Saturday afternoon. I had had lunch with my old house-master and his air of polite raillery had rather damped my ardour. But after lunch he had left me in his garden while he went to attend to his own affairs, and in the cool of the evening I had strolled down the long avenue of pines into College itself and through the deserted, ringing quadrangles and up the silent staircase to Monsieur

The Echo of Voices

Clavel's door. As I pressed the bell all my self-importance swelled up again. What would Monsieur Clavel have to say to my paper? Wouldn't he be greatly astonished? Wouldn't he think I was a wonderful person? I heard his quick, short steps within and in another second the door was opened and he stood before me — greyer, perhaps, and fatter, but the same Monsieur Clavel as of old. He did not recognise me at once and I had to explain who I was. But when he recalled my name he expressed delight at seeing me. He made me come in — he was just sitting down to tea. He resembled a grunting badger as he trotted to and fro through his queer little warren of chambers getting the tea things. His sitting-room looked out upon the distant playing-fields and we could watch the boys running about in their white flannels, and hear, through the open window, their far-off shouts. It was a soft, clear evening of late June. I had time to glance round me while Monsieur Clavel was attending to his kettle in the next room. The walls were lined with bound volumes of the French Classics, there was a piano in the corner, and several big chairs were dotted about. A smell of flowers and of scented tobacco filled the air. Monsieur Clavel came running in presently with the steaming kettle, and proceeded to make tea.

“Sit down, sit down,” he murmured, giving me

Monsieur Clavel

just that knowing and satisfied look which I remembered well.

It was this expression, suggesting old times so vividly, that made me suddenly recall the affair of Guadeloupe.

"Must pump him," I thought. So when we had finished tea and were sitting smoking together, I remarked all at once, "I hear you've been back to Guadeloupe, Monsieur Clavel."

"Hum, yes, I went back," he muttered quickly, frowning as though at some disagreeable idea.

A chill seemed to be cast over the room for an instant. He got up with a bound and seating himself at the piano played three or four bars of a rather sentimental tune by Rameau. Then he came back with a sigh and began to roll a cigarette. All this astonished me, but I had the sense not to press my questions further.

"Come, tell me what you have have been doing with yourself?" he asked eagerly.

He had quite recovered his spirits.

"I've begun to write lately," I answered in an off-hand — and trembling voice.

"Yes? — why, this is news indeed!"

He clapped his chubby hands, beaming at me, his great face working with pleasure.

"I fancied you would be interested," I continued;

The Echo of Voices

"in fact, I brought a little thing to show you — an essay on the Pleiad."

I produced it from my pocket and handed it to him as though it had been no more than a box of matches.

"Phew!" he said, nodding his head very rapidly and turning up his eyes.

I felt deliciously happy, and my calmness became, consequently, almost abnormal.

"Might I be allowed to call to-morrow and hear what you think of it?" I observed.

"I should say so," replied Monsieur Clavel, getting up and pinching my ear, "I should say so! Come to tea — come early, at three o'clock. We'll have a walk afterwards."

He gave a satisfied smile and patted the manuscript. "One of my pupils," he murmured.

"Tell me, Monsieur Clavel, are you surprised?" I asked.

"No, my dear friend," he said, "I always knew you would do something."

I felt a new thrill of pleasure. Such is the vanity of youth. I knew perfectly well that he had not given me a single thought from the day I had left school to this very afternoon and that his remark was a mere ebullition of momentary enthusiasm (very characteristic of him, too), and yet I said to my-

Monsieur Clavel

self over and over again, "What insight, what knowledge!"

I went on to talk about all I intended to do in the future. Monsieur Clavel drank it all in.

"You will be a great man," he said in a tone of complete sincerity and conviction. "As for me, I have done nothing, nothing."

He stopped for a second to ponder sadly.

"Do you know," he proceeded all at once, "that I am only living for one thing?"

I looked as sympathetic as I could.

"Yes, only for one thing — to make a home for my niece and nephew."

"Your niece and nephew? Tell me about them, Monsieur Clavel."

A shade of reserve crossed his face. Then, after a short hesitation, he continued, "I have bought a little villa in Normandy; we are all going to live there together. . . . They are orphans," he added.

He gazed at me with anxiety.

"You are thinking of resigning?" I asked as tactfully as I could. ("There goes Guadeloupe," I said to myself.)

"I have to," he muttered; "the new superannuation rules. I hope to get a pension."

This was a side of schoolmastering which had never presented itself to me before. I was interested to get at the bottom of it.

The Echo of Voices

"Well, but —" I began, and remembered that I had better keep off the subject of Guadeloupe. "Well — er — when have you to resign?"

"In four more years," he answered slowly, "when I'm sixty. The thing is, I'm not quite sure of my pension. I joined too early. But I'm depending on it. I've got to depend on it."

It was a notion which seemed to distress him. He rose and walked rapidly up and down the room several times. At last he stopped in front of the window and stood quite still there for nearly five minutes, with his back to me. When he turned round his face had regained its calm and was lit up by an expression of joy and happiness.

"How I love to see all this life about me," he said. "Thirty years now . . ." (he sighed) "well, time is bound to pass — it is a good place."

I did not answer.

("Will he remember to read my article?" I thought rather anxiously.)

"In four years," said Monsieur Clavel dreamily, "I leave all this." He nodded his head, pursing up his lips slyly as he used to do in olden days. "Perhaps I shall live twenty years longer. My dear niece and nephew . . . an idyllic spot. You never saw such a cherry orchard! And the hens! You know, I spend all my holidays there."

He sat down beside me and lit another cigarette.

Monsieur Clavel

"An acre of cherry orchard," he went on. "I think I made a good bargain. But I haven't been fortunate with my money. What you call these gild-edged investments — very bad! I've had some losses. And your English breweries, too. I'll tell you" (he leant confidentially forward)—"I'll tell you. I had three thousand pounds. I had saved it here — a pound at a time almost. My broker kept advising me 'put it into so and so.' *Alors*" (he hunched his shoulders dramatically) — "down, down, 'down! Beastly! — Beastly!" he repeated, looking at me as though in fury.

"So you sold out and bought this house?" I ventured.

"Precisely. But you see, I must have my pension now. Of course you won't say a word. Great many intrigues here — not the sort of men I care for at all. I like meeting people of talent, interesting people. All these schoolmasters — bah! Narrow-minded. I don't mix up with them more than I can help. But you — ah, ha! Fancy your being so distinguished already! Phew — an essay on the Pleiad! I shall read it."

He smoked silently, nodding his head. I got up to leave.

"Remember — to-morrow," he shouted after me as he showed me out of his door.

I walked back, much pleased with myself. I had

The Echo of Voices

evidently impressed Monsieur Clavel. I began to think of him with real interest. What was the truth about his visit to the West Indies. Funny old boy; rather pathetic too! I felt indulgent to old age. Poor Monsieur Clavel! I wondered what his nephew and niece were like. A cherry orchard — it sounded all right!

That evening after dinner when I was sitting with my old tutor in his garden I brought up the subject of Monsieur Clavel. "What was it, I asked, about his visit to Guadeloupe that had so entirely changed his mind?"

"Monsieur Clavel idealises things," murmured the old man.

And in the darkness of the garden I felt the soft breath of the night touch my cheek and ripple through the creeper behind me.

"Reality sometimes kills romance," he added.

I did not ask him any more questions because I felt sure it would be no use. Schoolmasters have a malicious dislike of one another as a rule. I've often noticed it. I was the more astonished, therefore, when after a few minutes' silence he began of his own accord to talk about Monsieur Clavel in his ironic and weary old voice.

"He was always telling us in the Common Room he meant to settle finally in — where was it? — Guadeloupe? Every day for years. I used to say

Monsieur Clavel

to him, 'You haven't been there since you were a boy — go and see it first.' Sound piece of advice. Humph! He didn't think much of it. Between ourselves, I understand his type quite well. Very reserved in some ways, but incurably romantic. Frightened of being laughed at. I must say he became a great bore. Some of the younger men took up my line. Humph! As you know, he did go at last. He's never said a word about it to me, but, of course, he's disillusioned. What could you expect? This is all confidential, mind. We have to cultivate the Olympian manner. Clavel was never meant for a schoolmaster. An excellent man in his way, most conscientious. But too romantic, my dear fellow, too romantic."

He got up slowly, his white shirt gleaming in the dusk.

"Must be going in," he murmured in a different voice, "getting old. Don't let me disturb you."

I heard his feeble steps on the gravel, and then once again complete stillness reigned in the garden. It seemed strangely suitable to my thoughts. At twenty-two one has these moments of exquisite silence when the mind rests, as it were, amidst the babel of its thoughts. I did not purposely think of Monsieur Clavel, but gradually the image of him possessed my brain. I seemed to comprehend him with a wonderful and deep illumination. I cared no

The Echo of Voices

longer for my intellectual pose, any more than the voyager sighting his promised land cares for the game of cards. The sweet, rare stillness of the night had a mysterious significance for me. Beyond the garden boundary, in the wooded heath, a night-jar had begun to whirr. The image of Monsieur Clavel, more august and moving at every instant, flooded my mind. "I alone understand him," I thought. (O romance, greatest and most perfidious of illusions!) I did not go to bed till very late.

By the next day I had, of course, entirely recovered my equilibrium. I tried to shine at breakfast with no particular success. This made me all the more anxious to meet Monsieur Clavel.

"He'll be reading my article this morning instead of going to Chapel," I said to myself. I was much perturbed. Could it really be true that I was a genius? Well, Monsieur Clavel ought to be able to say! I began to have hideous doubts that even such momentous questions were decided more by the tone in which one asked them than by anything else. It was like doctors and illness. Yet, in reality, it must either be "yes" or "no." I was a genius or I was not. Certainly. (I avoided my old tutor's mocking eyes.) Admitted. But *which* . . .

I excused myself from Chapel and went for a walk through the woods. It was at three o'clock punctually that I rang Monsieur Clavel's bell. I had quite

Monsieur Clavel

come to the conclusion by then that I must be a genius and that my paper on the Pleiade was one of the most astonishing things ever written. Consequently I was not in the least taken aback at being greeted by a cry of pleasure.

"I told you, I told you," exclaimed Monsieur Clavel excitedly . . . "marvellous . . . a master . . . you will go very far!" He searched closely into my face, nodding his head with great approval. "Very far," he said again.

"I am so glad you approve of it, Monsieur Clavel," I replied in a rather mincing voice. "In your opinion what is best about it?"

Monsieur Clavel spread out his hands.

"Ah, it is the tone, the manner, the — how shall I call it? — the temper. Very fine. So you are going to be a great man? This is a proud day for me."

As I say, I had already a first-rate opinion of myself when I got to Monsieur Clavel's that afternoon, but the warmth of his remarks put me into the seventh heaven. I felt already to give him my closest confidences. I could hardly conceal my exultation under a patronising smile.

"Come, Monsieur Clavel, you will make me quite conceited," I simpered. "Let us talk about you for a change. Tell me more about your plans."

The Echo of Voices

We were sitting in his room, the sun filtering upon us through the Venetian blinds.

"My plans," cried Monsieur Clavel, "you really take interest in my plans!"

There was something touching in his tone. He was looking eagerly at me, his eyes were dimmed with tears.

"Indeed I do, Monsieur Clavel," I replied in my natural voice.

He sighed deeply before answering.

"You don't know the atmosphere here," he said at length. "If one didn't have another life outside one would stifle to death. Not once in a year does any one speak to me as you have done. You come here and you ask me about my plans. You are not laughing at me, I know. You are in earnest."

My embarrassment caused me to murmur some unintelligible remark.

"What, and you have often thought of your old French master," he continued rapturously, "you, the best of all his pupils. This is what is balm to me. This is what I shall never forget. I came here when I was young like you, but I have grown old, I have grown hard, perhaps. I have had bitter disappointments — why think of them? I feel that they are of no more account. Do you know that it is three years now since the greatest happiness of

Monsieur Clavel

my life has begun? It was at a time of sorrow." He stopped for a minute to stare intently at the wall. "As you grow old," he added softly, "you want to think of youth. I have found my great happiness in my nephew and niece. They are waiting for me. Twice a week I hear from them. They tell me every detail. I have only to shut my eyes and I can see them sitting under the cherry trees. I can never be lonely again."

He jumped up briskly from his chair and stood facing me with his fat little legs wide apart and his finger cocked.

"They think me an old fool here but they forget that I've laid my foundations deep," he muttered angrily. "What do they intend to do in the future? — they don't know. Live in Clapham, I daresay. Clapham! That's your schoolmaster all over! I — I am the winner!"

He set about preparing tea and as he ran in and out of the room he kept referring to my article. I told him that I should pay him a visit some day in his Normandy cottage. He beamed on me. He was extraordinarily elated, almost like a boy on the first morning of the holidays. Our tea had the happy informality of a picnic. We laughed and joked, catching from each other the infection of high good humour. When it began to get cooler Monsieur Clavel suggested a stroll and we sallied forth through

The Echo of Voices

the Great Gate of the College. The sun was glinting low upon the distant river and its long, level rays threw a kind of yellow mist across the fields. Monsieur Clavel looked about him with a complacent glance. Nature herself appeared to sympathise with his hour of peace. He recited a few lines from Racine in a sonorous voice. We reached the bank of a small pond and sat down on the grass and talked of old times and faces. Twilight overtook us at last. Away behind us the College bell began to ring for evening chapel. Gnats eddied in clouds over the pond, bats flitted in the pale evening air, and the busy hum died out of the meadows. With the fall of light Monsieur Clavel's thoughts seemed to revert once more to the happy future that awaited him so surely.

"The ground is all prepared," he murmured, "I have left nothing to chance. In my old age I will live again in the lives of my nephew and niece. No more false hopes. . . ."

He stopped suddenly, lost in thought. . . . "No more false hopes," he repeated gently, getting up and looking at the dark, gleaming water.

I had no words then to meet such sentiments. We walked back side by side through the stillness without speaking.

("He has forgotten me altogether," I thought to myself.)

Monsieur Clavel

I felt slightly awed as though in the presence of some grand and tragic figure. Curious that a man so unheroic of appearance as Monsieur Clavel should have aroused this emotion in me. But the conceit of youth hides an impressionable heart.

I parted from Monsieur Clavel outside the Great Gate. We had a few last minutes of conversation and he told me again that I had "a great future—very great," and made me promise to come and see him next time I was down. He bade me farewell, clapping me on the shoulder and nodding his head wisely. But I could see that his mind was elsewhere—amidst the trees of his cherry orchard. I had an odd sensation that I had found him only to lose him again. I felt constrained and was glad to get away. . . .

I did not see Monsieur Clavel again for a year. He was not the sort of person one would exchange letters with. But when next I was at the College I went to call on him at once. It was just such a Saturday afternoon as before. Again I walked across the empty quadrangles in a mood of bland expectancy. For this time I carried with me a whole volume of essays on French literature. If I was hailed as a genius before, what now? I glowed all over.

As I reached the staircase what was my surprise and delight to see Monsieur Clavel going up in front

The Echo of Voices

of me. There was not mistaking that back. I called out to him in glee, "Hulloa, Monsieur Clavel, I'm just coming to you!"

He appeared to hesitate as though uncertain whether he had heard a voice or not, and then, slowly turning, he threw on me a long, blank stare. There was no recognition in it, nothing but gloomy indifference and absorbed vacancy.

"Monsieur Clavel," I gasped, "Monsieur Clavel!"

He gave an irritable shake to his head, as if to dispel some unpleasant dream, and without taking any more notice of me he continued stolidly to mount the stairs. I don't think I ever experienced a greater shock. Something very bad had evidently happened! I did not try to follow him but hurried back to my old tutor's house.

"What's the matter with Monsieur Clavel?" I said, bursting into his study.

He raised his eyebrows as though deploring a painful subject. There was just the very faintest suggestion of sarcasm in his pose.

"Melancholia," he answered; "a very sad affair. He does no more work. They have been keeping him out of pity. Quite hopeless. After this term — well, he will have to go." He half-turned away, his sane, mobile old face bent forward as though listening politely and incredulously. "Very, very sad," he mumbled in his beard.

Monsieur Clavel

"But why?" I cried impetuously. "Is it recent? Why has he become like this?"

The old man shuffled uneasily in his seat.

"He was an idealist," he said wearily. "He made plans and they came to nothing. That is all."

"Do you mean that something happened to his nephew and niece?" I almost shouted.

The flicker of a smile passed over his face.

"Yes, they both married," he answered drily.

It was as if a thunder clap had sounded in my ear. After a moment of insane staring I burst out laughing.

"Married — why, of course! What more natural," I stammered. "Then his foundations were in the sand after all."

My former tutor regarded me with grim disapproval. I went up to my room and in another hour had left the College.

I will confess that this affair upset me very much. It was too painful, too painful altogether. Indeed, it was an actual relief when, only a few weeks afterwards, I heard that Monsieur Clavel was no more.

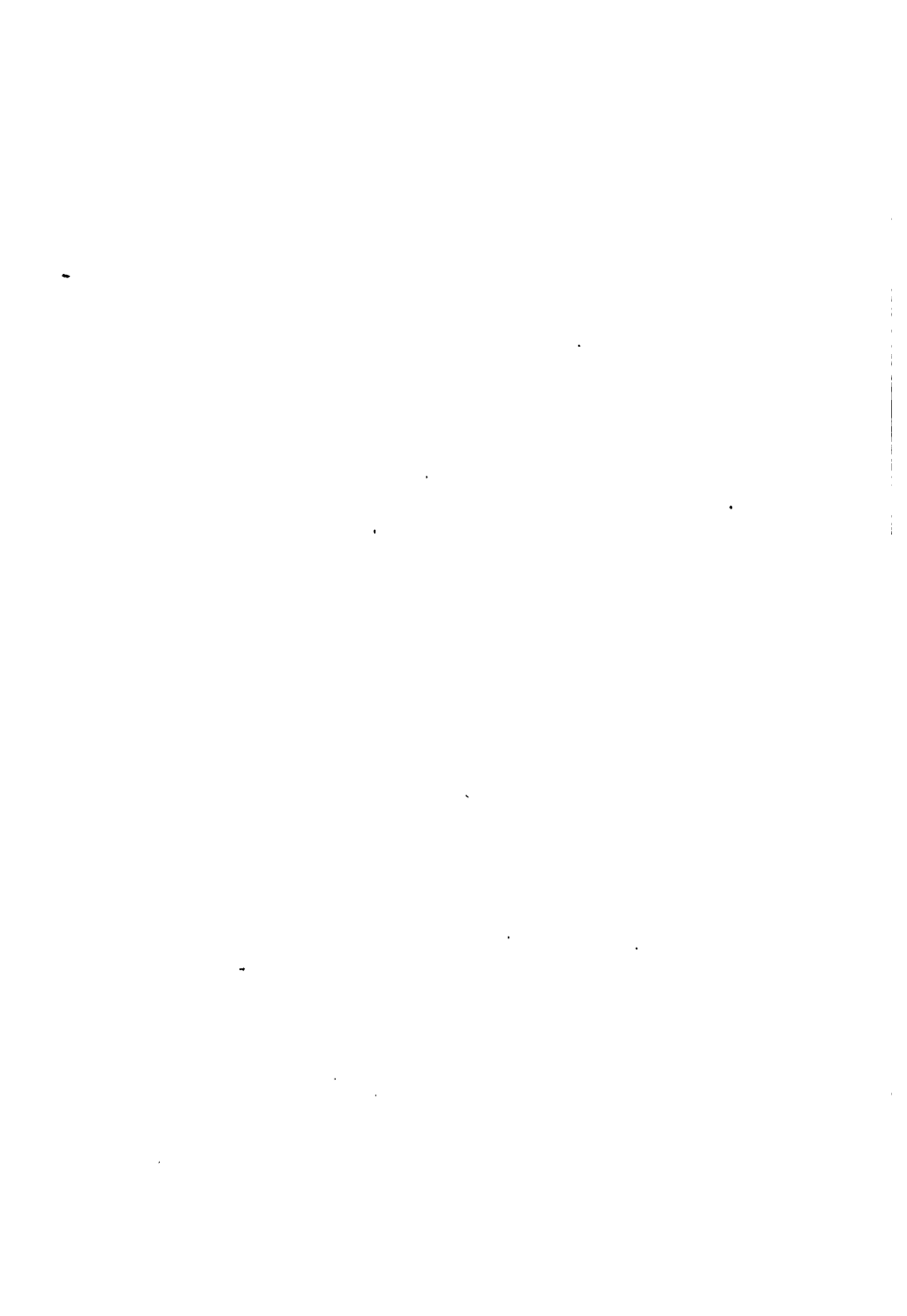
"I am writing to you," wrote my old housemaster, "because you were always interested in Monsieur Clavel. He is dead. He went out like a candle, slowly flickering, without a struggle. Poor old man! I am told that he had begun to weep a great deal and to talk once more of Guadeloupe as

The Echo of Voices

though he might find happiness there after all. He seemed to recognise no one. It is very pitiful. They say he had given all he had to his nephew and niece. They have not been communicated with because nobody knows their address. He is to have a fine funeral. I shall not attend as I am getting too old. Besides, what is the use? I shall wait till I play a more important part—it won't be long. . . ."

When I got this letter I half-thought of going myself. But, after all, I didn't. It really did seem too ironical. What a finish for an idealist!

DEEP DOWN



DEEP DOWN

ON the first day of the term Mr. Burgess, the new master, took the boys a walk they had never been before. About a mile from home they suddenly left the road and skirted along the side of a big field by a muddy footpath.

"We'll see where it leads to," said Mr. Burgess, who felt that he ought to do something to break the universal air of gloom.

The small boys, who had been walking alongside of him in a despondent cluster, visibly brightened.

"Come on, then," said Mr. Burgess heartily; "we'll go on a voyage of discovery. I haven't the least idea where it will take us."

Nobody said a word, though everybody except the new master, knew exactly where it would take them. It would take them right to the mouth of the tunnel and then along the edge of the cutting to Dakin's Farm, and so out to the Well Road. They knew it, not because they had ever been there, but because, being a notoriously forbidden place for a walk, its every feature was a sort of school tradition. Old Glossop would no more have allowed a master to take boys along that path than he would have al-

The Echo of Voices

lowed him to give them cigarettes. That was a commonplace; and yet here was one of them doing it on the very first day! The boys looked at one another and at Burgess with a fearful joy. "He's forgotten to tell him," ran from mouth to mouth. It was true: he *had* forgotten to tell him. The excellent Mr. Burgess was striding ahead with as clear a conscience as though he were still upon the dreary high road.

He was an eccentric man, rather kind, who regarded boys as inhuman, and whose only interest in life was the study of the Patristic writings. He had been engaged for years upon a commentary on the Fathers which was to astonish the theologians and scholars of Europe. He considered school-mastering, into which he had been driven by poverty, as a bore, and he tried to get through the terms with as little worry to himself as possible. Indeed, he lived in a world of his own and was seldom properly aware of what was going on around him. That was why headmasters did not care to keep him for long, and why he had drifted from one small preparatory school to another during the last seventeen years. He was invariably popular with boys because he interfered little with them and because he used, now and then, to tell them stories about marvellous fish he had caught in Tasmania — where he had once lived for a short time on account of his lungs.

Deep Down

"Now then, boys, hurry up," he cried, looking round and beckoning to the stragglers.

The thirty small boys or so who had been hanging back, whispering excitedly, quickened their steps, and the whole party began to trudge along the narrow path. Mr. Burgess walked silently, with down-cast eyes, not looking where he was going, lost in an abstruse point of early Christian theology. At such moments he seemed to feel himself present at one of the great councils, and would, as it were, take sides, sometimes even aloud. Suddenly he was startled out of his reverie by hearing a voice at his elbow say, "Look, sir, there's the railway."

Mr. Burgess sighed. The splendid phantom of the past dissolved like a breath, and, slowly raising his eyes, he stared at the speaker.

"What is it, my boy?" he asked.

"It's the railway, sir," answered half a dozen voices.

And sure enough the path had led them almost up to the edge of a deep cutting, just at the point where a tunnel emerged from under the rise. The boys ran forward to gaze down at the black mouth of the tunnel.

"Isn't it fine, sir?" said one of them to Burgess, who had come up.

But Mr. Burgess was irritated.

"None of that!" he shouted angrily. "Don't let

The Echo of Voices

me catch any of you loitering again. Under no consideration must you leave the path."

"But there's a train coming, sir; we can hear it," urged one of the boys, as if this were a quite irresistible explanation.

He looked so extremely earnest that Mr. Burgess laughed.

"Well, just for this once," he said good-humouredly.

He shivered. It was one of those chill, damp, and windless afternoons of late January when the very sky looks sodden and little twigs can be heard snapping in every copse. Before him the row of boys stood motionless with craning necks; overhead the rooks were flying stealthily homewards one by one, and all around the bare fields stretched like an ocean of brown mud. The cutting, which lay across them, resembled a clean slice carved out of the earth by a gigantic knife. It had a repugnant and desolate appearance. The rank grass upon its slopes was all wet and withered, a smell of decay and vitiated air hung over it, and a steamy mist was rising from the bottom. Down there darkness was gathering very fast. The sound of dripping could be heard from a hundred directions.

Mr. Burgess took in the whole landscape at a glance.

Deep Down

"I don't hear any train," he said all at once; "really, I think we had better be going on."

"Listen, sir; there it is," said a boy.

He heard it then, a strangled sound deep within the hill like a monster roaring in a cave. A shudder of delight passed over the row of heads.

"It's coming nearer, sir," gasped some one.

And suddenly there rushed out of the tunnel an engine dragging a long string of open wagons. The boys shouted with glee, and the echo of the passing train clashed from side to side of the cutting, with its thunderous repetitions dying away right down the line. No one moved for a minute. Smoke was coiling out of the tunnel, blurring the sombre outlines of the hollow and clinging to the grimy archway above.

"We can't stand here all night," said Mr. Burgess at length; "come along, boys."

They followed him — all except one. Gilbert, the biggest boy in the school, had remained behind gazing down at the tunnel. But Mr. Burgess, who was beginning to slip back into another age, did not notice his absence. He heard a lot of small boys chattering round him, and he smiled instinctively. It made a not unpleasant chorus — muffled, dream-like — to a strange argument he was having with the Bishop of Hippo. The question turned on whether

The Echo of Voices

children who died in infancy could be saved without baptism. "Pelagius was right," mumbled Burgess; "there is no heresy in his doctrine. Augustine, if I could but meet you upon your own burning African sands! You call yourself orthodox, but it is a vain delusion because, in your pride, you forgot that Christ alone is the Fountain-head. I see you start. But what did Christ say: 'Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto Me: for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.' Your lips move. Ah, serpent, I know your wiles! You whisper, 'He that believeth in Me and is baptised shall be saved.' Yes; they are Christ's words, but they are metaphorical. For how does the sentence end: 'But he that believeth not shall be damned.' There is no word here of baptism. Christ most manifestly meant by baptism the putting-on of a new spirit: 'Except a man be born again he cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven.' Born again — do you hear? He must recover the lost innocence of his childhood through the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ. Listen, O learned one. Mankind is vile, but his villainy is instilled into him afresh in each generation by the machinations of the sleepless Devil. It is not inherent in his nature. Do not Christ's own words hint at this great truth? The bull, *Ineffabilis Deus*, was unnecessary, for original sin is a mere figment. Moreover, it arises from the errors of the Apostles,

Deep Down

of Justin Martyr, and of Tertullian, who were unable to comprehend the verbal images of our Master. No; throughout His earthly life Christ was ever calling upon us to make our hearts even as the heart of a child. Now, therefore, if He did not reject upon earth, but called to Him, the unbaptised children of Galilee, how gladly will He welcome all His children to His Eternal Mansions! You sneer. I care not, scoff! But remember that there is more pleasure in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety and nine just persons that need no repentance. There is divine irony in that sentence, O Bishop. It is as much Christ's judgment upon the formalist as upon the Pharisee. A pure and contrite heart is more to Him than a sea of incense. Out upon you! It is you — you, Augustine — who are heretical, and with you the whole Catholic Church."

He rubbed his hands, walking with rapid strides along the path. The boys, almost running to keep pace with him, were astonished to see the smiles and frowns come and go on his face. They nudged one another. Unlike Burgess, *they* knew that Gilbert had stayed behind; but, also unlike Burgess, it was not *their* business. He could hear just as well as they could — besides, Gilbert was Gilbert! There was no accounting for him. They turned, they saw him standing there by the edge, and they merely

shrugged their shoulders. After all, it was Gilbert — the strongest boy in the school, who had once kicked a goal from nearly half-way, who never took sides, who was always quite uninterested about everything; who was, in fact, entirely mad, and who invariably insisted on walking by himself far behind every one else.

"I bet you he's waiting till we get on a bit," said presently a small boy called Simpson to his friend Butterworth.

"I know that," snapped his companion, and they relapsed into silence.

The other boys, in the interest of watching the new master, had soon forgotten all about Gilbert; but Simpson and Butterworth were still thinking of him. He was their hero. They never discussed him openly, but each knew that the other considered him the most wonderful person in the world. That was why, on walks, they tried to keep behind in the hopes that one day Gilbert would notice them and would let them accompany him. So far it had been completely unsuccessful, but it made no difference. So now gradually they found themselves falling back. Without saying a word to one another it occurred to them both to watch what Gilbert would do. The rest of the school had passed the corner by Dakin's Farm and were out of sight. Simpson and Butterworth suddenly stopped, turned round, and uttered at the

Deep Down

very same instant a sort of stifled exclamation. Gilbert had disappeared! . . .

Alone of all the boys in the school Gilbert had felt no particular exultation when Burgess led them on to the forbidden path. He was sunk in gloom at the memory of the holidays now so fatally over, and he followed the others mechanically. He did not like school. It worried him; worried him perpetually. But he loved his old home in the Lincoln fens with a passionate love. If Burgess regarded terms as a bore, Gilbert regarded them as a nightmare. Between these so dissimilar natures there was this unguessed bond of an inner and secret life. They were true egoists. They lived for an idea that was the expression of a personal want.

Gilbert, behind the rest, padded along like a tired old dog, with head bent and a look of profound misery on his face. "If only I were back at home," he kept thinking bitterly. All at once he noticed that the other boys had stopped and were staring down over the bank of the cutting. Gilbert stared too, not because he felt interested, but because every one else was doing it. He saw beneath him two sets of railway lines glistening like the trail of slugs after a shower, and the great black mouth of a tunnel yawning at him in the dusk. It was all very tremendous. And suddenly he thought with fear, "Suppose I saw some one standing down there." Maybe he had

The Echo of Voices

heard the sound of the approaching train. Who can say? As soon as it had passed he looked again at the tunnel. "Yes; and suppose a train had been coming," he added to himself very slowly.

He did not notice the departure of the other boys. For several minutes afterwards he remained there, quite motionless, his eyes riveted on the tunnel, like a person deep in thought. As a matter of fact only one thing filled his mind; one thing which, in a moment, had driven everything else out, and that was a strange sensation. It was as though the whole world had dwindled and the single real thing in the universe was that cavernous mouth. He started suddenly and gazed round at the ploughed fields. They appeared insignificant, veiled, part of another life. It was a weird effect, but it did not surprise him somehow, and as he turned his eyes once more on the tunnel it seemed to him that only there, there in the hollow, was there anything real. Without thinking what he was about, he took a few steps down the slippery zigzag path.

He was startled at hearing above his head a loud cry. "What am I doing here?" he thought instantaneously, and, looking up, he saw two small boys bending over the cutting. "Why, it's these kids!" he muttered in an astonished voice.

"Who are you shouting at?" he cried back, and he began to clamber up the bank.

Deep Down

Simpson and Butterworth regarded him in confusion.

"We — we thought we'd tell you," blurted the latter; "you know every one's miles ahead. We'll get into an awful row. What *were* you doing?" he added hurriedly.

"Oh, don't bother me," answered Gilbert. "Come on, let's run for it."

Simpson and Butterworth swelled with pride. Fancy, running with Gilbert! The whole school would see them!

The three of them began to race along the path. They overtook the others just as they were emerging on to the Well Road. Luckily for them Mr. Burgess was still buried in the abstruser phases of his imaginary duologue, and their absence had not been officially noticed.

Simpson and Butterworth smiled with content at the inquisitive glances cast on them by the others; but, as for Gilbert, he looked more dismal than ever. What on earth had happened to him? Something beastly! He thought of his home, and it seemed to him as though a slight mist had risen over it, and as though it had receded very far. It filled him with grief. Never before had he felt such utter, cold despair; and the image of the cutting rose up, immense, significant, very silent. "I'm glad I saw no one," he muttered.

The Echo of Voices

That night he had a sinister dream. It was like this: He seemed to be standing upon the top of the cutting once more, gazing down almost with anguish at the mouth of the tunnel. He didn't know why he felt such anguish, because it was all just as he had seen it that afternoon. And yet, surely, it was not quite the same. The hollow, instead of being dark, was filled with a subdued light. He could make out every little detail quite plainly. And this was the more remarkable as up above the earth was in pitchy blackness. Yes; he could see every detail, and all was as he had expected. All? Why, then, did he feel such anguish? He couldn't have said, but he kept peering down as if there was still something to be made out. And all at once, as he looked, he saw the figure of a youth standing by the tunnel. He could have sworn that it had not been there a moment since, but he was not astonished. The youth was bending forward, gazing in at the mouth. He stood very still. He was listening. And Gilbert himself was also listening. "The train is coming," he thought. He would like to have shouted, but he was unable to. And suddenly it seemed to him that he knew the figure — it was himself. Again he was horrified, but not astonished. He thought quick as lightning. "When the train comes he will lie down." Ah! he must give a shout. He made a tremendous effort, and suddenly his lips were unloosed and he uttered a

Deep Down

cry. It woke him. He sat up in bed, trembling all over. He rubbed his eyes. "Was I dreaming?" he muttered. Then he did a singular thing. He got out of bed and slipped into his clothes. He knew that he must go at once to the tunnel. He didn't argue about it—it was impossible to resist. He had never broken bounds before. No matter. It was quite simple. Nothing easier. He would be there in less than half an hour. . . .

There were ten boys in Gilbert's dormitory, but only one of them had been awakened by the cry of the dreamer. In the dim light of the lowered gas-jet Simpson saw his hero sit up, get out of bed, and begin to dress. Finally he saw him go softly out of the room carrying his shoes. He cautiously woke Butterworth, who slept in the next bed, and the two small boys remained whispering for nearly an hour and a half. At the end of that time Gilbert returned and got back into bed. It was yet a long time till dawn. In the morning Simpson and Butterworth avoided speaking of the subject. Each had determined, however, that he would be awake on the following night. . . .

Gilbert had found no difficulty in escaping from the school. He had run the whole way to the cutting. In the disordered state of his mind he felt no fear of detection, no guilt, nothing but an overpowering impulse. The moon was at the full, and its

The Echo of Voices

pale light glowed upon the desolate scene. All was silent. Gilbert did not hesitate. He ran sideways down the path on to the line. And he stood there, bending forward, looking into the black abyss of the tunnel. It was frightfully thrilling. And down there the dripping sounded louder, seemed to fill the dark air with a thousand murmurs. And on each side the steep banks towered like solid walls, high as the heavens, shutting out the world and everything he knew; shutting out his home on the fens, the familiar faces, the very emotions of joy and gladness. Yes, it was frightfully thrilling. Suddenly he heard, far off in the tunnel, the rumble of a train. He lay down flat between the rails. And without stirring, hardly able to breathe, he allowed the train to pass over him. At last he got up. "I dared to do it," he thought deliriously. And before him all his past life seemed to crumble, blurred and indistinct as an old memory. . . .

The next afternoon Mr. Burgess, still unwarned by the forgetful Glossop, took the boys for the same walk. He realised that it had been a success. "But," said he, "there will be no loitering to-day, and no stopping to see trains or things of that sort. You understand?"

Simpson and Butterworth threw a rapid glance at Gilbert, who was standing in the rear, taking no notice of anything. All the other boys declared in a

Deep Down

loud voice that they understood perfectly. Mr. Burgess smiled benignly on them. He foresaw that this school was going to be a sort of haven to him. Such an idea charmed his fancy. For he was wrestling just now with an important chapter, and, of all things, he needed peace of mind. He was greatly put out therefore when, after having negotiated the danger spot of the cutting without any bother, he found, simply by the chance of turning his head, that one boy had not obeyed his command. They were at least a hundred yards past the tunnel when he made this discovery.

"Who's that boy?" he asked sharply.

"Gilbert, sir," answered a score of voices.

For a few seconds the whole school, with Mr. Burgess in their midst, started at the motionless, bent figure of the absorbed Gilbert. "What's the boy up to?" muttered Mr. Burgess to himself. He felt, uninterested though he was in the psychology of boys, quite uneasy at that appearance of strained immobility. And aloud to the school he added, "You all wait here — I'll go and fetch him myself." He went hastily back. Gilbert did not hear him coming — he was as truly in another world as was Burgess when he used to imagine himself at the Council of Nicæa.

"Look here, didn't I say there was to be no loitering?" said Mr. Burgess gruffly, tapping him on the shoulder.

The Echo of Voices

The boy turned and gave him a stare.

"Yes, sir," he answered in a low voice.

"Come, my boy, this won't do," continued the master; "if you heard me you should have obeyed me."

"Yes, sir," answered Gilbert again.

Mr. Burgess looked at him. Certainly an odd type!

"Your name's Gilbert, isn't it?" he inquired. The other nodded. "Well, remember, Gilbert, if I catch you disobeying me again it'll be the worse for you. Is that plain enough?"

"Yes, sir," repeated Gilbert once more.

Mr. Burgess was fidgeted by the meek and, so to say, impersonal behaviour of the boy.

"That's all very well," he went on, "but any one can say, 'Yes, sir,' when they've been found out. What I want to know is, why did you stay behind?"

Gilbert looked sheepishly at him.

"I don't know, sir," he replied at length.

"Don't prevaricate, my boy. It's a thing I dislike. I repeat, why did you stay behind?"

He would have said more, but he saw suddenly upon the boy's face a strange look, a look of supplication and of despair.

"All right, I won't go into it just now," he added quickly; "but come to my room this evening after prayers. We can thrash it out there."

"Very good, sir," answered Gilbert with reluc-

Deep Down

tance, and the two of them rejoined the wondering school. . . .

Although Simpson and Butterworth had been, of course, quite unable to hear a word of what had been said, they had watched the whole scene with intense interest. Like most small boys they could hide much cunning under an air of utter indifference. Without ever mutally hinting at such a thing, both had come to the conclusion that Gilbert's behaviour in the night had had something to do with the tunnel; and now, again, they saw another phase of the same thing opening from this conversation with the schoolmaster. Both resolved that nothing should escape them. After prayers that night they saw Gilbert go off towards Mr. Burgess's room, and they realised at once that here was still a further link of the chain. They waited impatiently for developments. . . .

When Gilbert entered Mr. Burgess's room he found him studying a big Latin book. It was a volume of Tyrannius Rufinus. The master looked up, nodded to the boy to be seated, and continued to read. He was lost in the arid pages of the "*De Adulteratoine Librorum Origenis*." He felt sympathy for Rufinus in his attack upon the famous Origen. "Yes," he thought, "the Pope himself condemned Origen. The devout Anastasius was not likely to err. And even Jerome turned from his writings at last. But the glamour of great reputations has in-

The Echo of Voices

variably been fatal. The name of Origen was all-powerful to the Christians of those days. Men like Rufinus, the reformers of abuses, run their heads against the eternal snobbishness of the world. They are the true conservatives. The suspicions of the Orthodox in every age are the mere reflection of their cowardice. What could be more absurd than to question the fundamental rightness of this saintly Father? ”

He suddenly glanced up, saw Gilbert there before him, and remembered everything. He closed the book with a sigh. More trouble! He should never have ordered the boy to come. He had done it in a moment of curiosity, but he repented it. The whole episode jarred on him.

“ So here you are,” he began awkwardly.

“ You said I was to come, sir,” muttered Gilbert.

“ Let me see — what was it? Oh, about this afternoon. Well, what have you to say? ”

Gilbert shuffled his feet.

“ What I mean is, have you anything to say? ” continued the master kindly. “ Are you unhappy about anything? ”

Gilbert bit his lips and frowned.

“ No; I won’t ask you if you are unhappy,” said the other, looking closely at Gilbert, “ but I’ll ask you why you’re unhappy. Is it home-sickness? I used to be like that.”

Deep Down

"Oh, sir, I wish it was!" burst from the boy.

Mr. Burgess raised his eyebrows in astonishment.

"That's a very odd remark," he observed.

"Is it, sir?" replied Gilbert bleakly.

"Very odd. You should explain yourself. For instance, what was it made you stay behind this afternoon?"

"I was looking at the tunnel, sir."

"Yes, yes; I know. But what's the matter? What's worrying you? You can speak to me quite frankly."

"I feel that everything's changed, sir," said Gilbert almost in a whisper.

"What *do* you mean?"

"I don't know, sir."

Mr. Burgess made a gesture of hopelessness. At the same time he felt there was something here it was his duty to investigate.

"And certainly *I* don't," he responded testily. "Can't you tell me in plain English?" But seeing once more upon the boy's face a look of terror and supplication, he added in a friendly voice, "I promise to help you if I can."

Gilbert, for the first time that day, felt a tinge of human warmth about his heart. Dare he confide in him and could he ever make him understand? He rose from his chair and came right up to where Mr. Burgess was sitting.

The Echo of Voices

"I feel that I've lost everything I cared for, and — and I don't know whether I mind," he stammered.

"Sit down and tell me all," said Mr. Burgess in a firm voice.

And, at length, in broken sentences, Gilbert told him his trouble. He told it with such vehemence that his listener could feel the stir of his mixed and passionate emotions like invisible tentacles touching him all over his face. But there was one point — the most important of all — on which Gilbert was silent. He said nothing about his midnight adventure. It simply would not pass his lips — and, think, think, suppose he wanted to go again! Ah! cursed thought — but how could he be sure, how could he see clearly?

Mr. Burgess listened without saying a word. He would like to have been able to laugh at that grotesque recital, but he did not feel at all like laughing. "It's a regular story from the Thebaïd," he said to himself. And yet what was there really in it all? Nothing! The silly fancies of a nervous boy! Why had he ever been such a fool as to bother about him? But he needed his help — he had promised it. Besides, he *needed* it.

"I tell you what it is, Gilbert," he said in a confidential voice, "you've got too vivid an imagination. I'm very glad you spoke to me. You'll find that once having shared this with some one else it'll all melt.

Deep Down

Don't let things like that weigh on your mind. Your feelings will take care of themselves. Just go on with your life as usual. There's nothing really the matter. And now, my boy, we won't talk any more about it. That's much the best."

He got up, smiling, and held out his hand to Gilbert.

"Good-night, and remember I understand," he said cordially.

Gilbert went out of the room, concealing his dejection as well as he could. The master's words, so blind to all the subtle agony and indecision of his heart, had only deepened around him his sense of dreadful isolation. . . .

In the middle of the night, Simpson and Butterworth, watching breathlessly, saw Gilbert rise, dress, and leave the room. No sooner had he gone than, in a twinkling, they, too, had risen, thrown on coats and trousers, and run after him. All was quiet in the house of the respected Mr. Glossop. Shadows could hardly have made less sound than did the three boys; and, indeed, they resembled shadows as they fitted out into the moonlight, one ahead, two behind, and all running under the lee of the house. Gilbert made straight for the cutting, and the two small boys, from a distance, saw him turn the corner of the field into the muddy path. When they reached the embankment he was not to be seen.

The Echo of Voices

"Down there!" whispered Simpson.

"Yes; look at him, look at him!" exclaimed Butterworth.

He was standing on the line, very close to the tunnel, and staring into it. All at once they saw him take a step forward and disappear within its mouth.

Simpson and Butterworth did not wait for anything more. They were frightened. They turned and ran homewards as fast as they could. . . .

Gilbert had left the presence of the schoolmaster feeling not only isolated from all the world, but very unwell. A strange, gnawing pain was beginning to stir in his mind. He did not try to analyse it. He had only one wish, and that was to fall asleep and not to wake till morning. But in the middle of the night he suddenly started up. The pain in his head was worse: it had taken the form of a voice which kept repeating, "Get up and go to the tunnel." "Oh," thought Gilbert, "that was it, was it?" and without resisting for a second he put on his clothes and escaped from the house. His awful isolation, in which even the memory of his home appeared dim and meaningless, made him hasten to reach the only real place remaining on the earth. The cutting, the tunnel — how safe they were, like a rock in the middle of the ocean! He would hold on to them and not let go. Firm and solid, they seemed to rise before him in the still and vast expanse of nothingness.

Deep Down

"Never, never let go," he thought, hurrying forward.

And here he was at last! He felt a new man — so secure, so free from pain. He looked at the mouth and he said, "I'll walk into the tunnel, into the very middle, and then I'll lie down and the train will go over me, and I shall know that I've dared to do it." It was a great idea and very thrilling. Oh, it was splendid to have the protection of something *real*! He was not afraid. He began to walk boldly into the heart of the blackness. "Won't it roar!" he thought, laughing inwardly. He was surprised to find that he was singing. He sat down on the rails, singing and shouting with joy. How happy it was to have something *real* to lay hold on! Apparently the approaching train was not real at all, for Gilbert never heard it. There was a hammering in his ears, making a much louder noise. He was given no conscious chance of testing his bravery again. . . .

After Gilbert's departure, Mr. Burgess had tried to dismiss the matter from his mind and to continue his study of Rufinus. But the boy's story — or rather the way he had told it — had left a curious impression on him. "I do hope I did right," he thought. He felt angry with himself, humiliated, and oppressed! Ah! these schoolboys, they were always coming between him and the fulfilment of his one desire! How could he work, how could he finish his huge undertaking if his soul were troubled? He be-

gan to walk up and down his room. He tried to conjure up the august scenes of the past, those images which had never failed to comfort his lonely hours. It was in vain. Gilbert's story protruded itself at every moment. "What could I have said to him?" he argued. He was deeply disturbed. "I have lived in myself too long; the slightest thing upsets me." He felt more and more uneasy. "Wait," he muttered desperately, "before he came I was thinking of old Rufinus. I was going into the question of his attack upon the writings of Origen. Poor Rufinus!—he, too, had his peaceful time broken in upon, and forever. O Alaric, you have much to answer for! Pinetum might have kept its honoured guest for many a long year but for your invasion. Presumptuous man, how little you realised what you were doing! But, alas, you were only one of the Church's innumerable foes! It was men like Rufinus, like Cassian, like Prosper, and like Sidonius Apollinaris who, obscurer Fathers as some consider them, steered the Church through many a crisis of its history. They are as the distant stars, shining minute through the immensity of stellar space, but in reality of the first magnitude, burning with fervent heat, and glorious beyond the timid reach of our imaginations."

He stopped in the middle of the room and suddenly scowled. "Ah, that Gilbert!" he cried. "I can't

Deep Down

think of anything," he added nervously; "it all seems so remote, so remote." He went to the table, sat down, and rested his head in his hands. "Yes; I shall never finish it," he pondered. "How many years now — ten, eleven? And Migne's texts are so corrupt. O Lord! I am weak; my courage fails me! Desert me not. What I do is all to Thy honour and glory."

He was unspeakably dismayed. The visit of the boy had served to upset the balance of a mind already overwrought. It had shown him a sombre and hidden glimpse of life where he had least expected to find it. The early Christians, he knew, were often possessed, encompassed as they were by an army of fiends, but it was too ghastly to think that the Devil had come again upon earth to torment the growing generation. For a long time he remained bowed over the table. "No; I shall never finish it," he murmured, and at the mere idea the whole work of his lifetime seemed to lie shattered at his feet. He was a solitary man. He had no friends. If this were to fail him, what then would remain? He did not dare to frame the answer because he knew that the answer was "nothing." "I'm not well to-night," he whispered. He got up and went to the window, through which the moonlight was streaming. "Not at all well," he whispered again.

It was at that instant that he caught sight of two

The Echo of Voices

small boys stealing along the corner of the house. His window was on the ground floor; he opened it, jumped out, and had caught them before they could take alarm.

"Here, let me see you by the light," he said sternly, and he dragged them back with him into his room.

Five minutes later Mr. Burgess was tearing down the road. He knew all that the boys had to tell him. He ran as he had never run before, stumbling, sobbing for breath. He reached the cutting, he slithered down on to the line, and he darted into the tunnel, calling out Gilbert's name as he went. The only reply was a sort of mad, ringing echo of his own voice. He stopped and he called again, once, very loudly, "Gilbert, where are you?" And the confused clamour of his voice broke round him in the tunnel like a clap of thunder. Mr. Burgess waited till all was still. He was shaking. "Answer, answer!" he shouted in frenzy; then, knowing suddenly that he would never get any answer, he rushed out of the tunnel. He was in a panic. He ran home, locked himself into his room, and began tearing up his manuscript as though he had not a moment to spare. "It was this kept me from understanding," he thought frantically; "it's all meaningless, waste paper, the work of a fool. It's I who am responsible. I and only I." All at once he stopped, looked

Deep Down

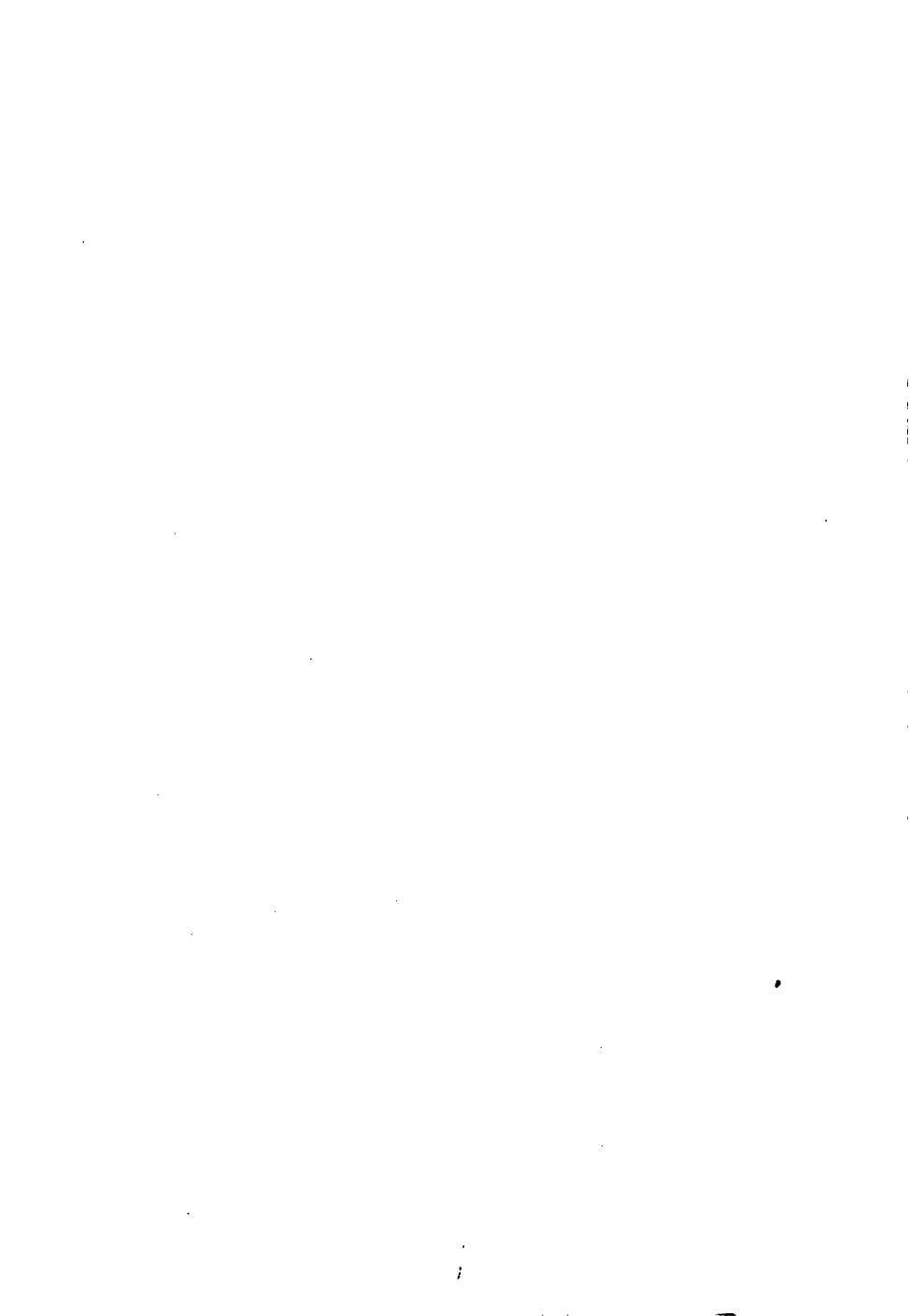
with horror upon the wreck of his life's work, and went tottering into his bedroom. During the whole of that night he lay, with his eyes wide open, staring up at the ceiling. . . .

When the boys trooped into the dining-hall for breakfast the next morning they noticed that old Glossop was in one of his bad moods. He watched them enter without a smile. He had just received a note from his new master to announce that he was so unwell that he must resign forthwith. What an endless trial they were, these masters of his! He gazed gloomily round at the boys, and as he did so he perceived that one was absent.

"Where is Gilbert?" he demanded ominously.

Nobody answered, but in the deathlike silence that supervened Simpson and Butterworth looked fixedly at one another.

NINETEEN



NINETEEN

I

WE were sitting, Ted Brownlow and I, under the apple trees of his little orchard. A deal table had been brought from the house and we were having tea in the long grass. Beneath us, starting from our very feet, the slope of the hill showed the long valley of the Severn and the river glinting here and there until it disappeared in haze towards the Bristol Channel. Not a breath of air stirred the apple leaves above us, and the sky, without a cloud, had lost its deeper blue in the hot stillness of the afternoon.

We had been talking about old times and had gradually fallen silent. That's what usually happens. One cannot really talk about the past. Too many faces begin to crowd upon one's memory, too many intimate, moving and forgotten scenes. "Do you remember so and so?" some one asks. Remember so and so! Good gracious! Remember him indeed! And all you can do is to answer, "Yes I remember him. Wasn't it he who took us to see those girls at Blunt's Cottage?" Phew . . . One can so-

The Echo of Voices

liloquise about the past — that's different — one can't discuss it.

So we had been sitting silent like that for perhaps five minutes when my friend, rising abruptly, said that he must go in and see "How Ada was getting on." (Ada is his sister — an invalid these last ten years.)

I nodded. I watched his tall, thin figure go through the wooden orchard gate, across the lawn, into the house, and all of a sudden my wayward thoughts fixed themselves on him. After all he was part of my past, too. I had known him for nearly twenty years, ever since he had returned from his wild travels and had settled down for good upon this little Cotswold farm. "And this is the life he leads now!" I muttered, amazed, even then, after all these years. For it *was* amazing. You had only to think of his past. Not, indeed, that he had ever told me much about it. He kept the memory of his wanderings locked in his own bosom. Occasionally he would mention them by way of reference ("That was the year I was in —— island" or "It would be about then I discovered that tributary of the ——"), or just occasionally he would tell me some strange anecdote (how fantastically he could conjure the wilderness before me!), but, on the whole, he was not given to reminiscence. Not at all, I assure you. He would much rather have discussed the latest

batch of French Memoirs from the London Library. Reading, farming, and the care of his sister made up the daily round.

No, it was not from anything he had said that I knew about his wanderings. It was from that little book he wrote in the first months of his return to civilisation. Do you know it? It is called "Coral Reefs and Unrecorded Bays." Nowadays I never see a copy about and I suppose it must be very rare. It fell flat at the time, I remember, which doesn't surprise me but which does assure me in my opinion of public taste. For if ever there was a singular and beautiful book it is the "Coral Reefs and Unrecorded Bays" that my friend, Ted Brownlow (under the pseudonym of "Southward Ho"), wrote so many years since. The very title fascinates me and as for the contents, I have read them, I think, a hundred times. The glow of tropical sunlight falls upon these pages. As you read you can see the lagoons opening from the sea with their ring of dark forest, you can hear the frogs calling in their pools drowning the surf upon the sand. A strange book — and utterly unknown! It's author never alludes to it. But how often have I taken it up on these quiet summer evenings and, after reading a few pages, closed it and sat looking towards the Bristol Channel and imagined how I, myself, might sail outwards and "down under" to the South. I shall never do it, of

The Echo of Voices

course; I am too old. But I am glad to have this fancy and to feel that there is still something left, some secret delight, and that destroying time has not destroyed the most precious of all its gifts, has not destroyed romance, the breath of joy and life. . . .

And so, as I watched Ted Brownlow disappear into his house, I began to wonder whether he, too, had such thoughts or whether age had, at last, withered the fire within him. Did he think of his past life with vain regret or was it no more to him than the peaceful present? Had time, which evaporates the ardour of most men's desire, left him like old, old port which, long ripening to maturity, becomes, at length, thin, acid, without a history, or had it only deepened, as does occasionally happen, the passionate longings of youth and memory. . . .

It seemed a long time before he came out again. If anything the day had grown still more breathless. The bees were drowsily buzzing, and the hens, having covered their backs with dust, were crouching beneath the trees. The sun shone a little mistily and the glare was leaving the sky. How pleasant to sit in the orchard and let these vague questions filter through the brain! The slight sadness of my mood harmonised with the declining day. I could have waited there contentedly till darkness had come, but just then my friend emerged from the house. With his stoop and his slow, shuffling gait he resembled

Nineteen

the imaginary professor of a novel. And this was the great traveller of old! I was seized with a sudden and more intense curiosity. I *must* know. . . .

On rejoining me he made some casual, apologetic remark. I smiled as though I had taken it in and I asked him quickly, "Do you never feel a wish to go back to the Tropics?"

He gave me rather a startled glance.

"I? — no, never. What a question! That's to say, not now. Why should I?"

"Well, but what do you mean exactly?" I insisted.

He got up, fidgeted with his hands, and sat down again.

"My dear fellow," he said, "you don't know what a change twenty years has made out there. I should feel like a fish out of water. Almost every one of my friends . . . it would be ghastly. Besides — besides I might be quite disillusioned."

He looked jeeringly at me.

"Just think, suppose I were disillusioned!" he added.

"But you know what to expect."

"On the contrary," he remarked drily, "I know nothing at all about it. Material facts — yes. On such and such a day after leaving the Channel you will make such and such a landfall. Quite right.

The Echo of Voices

But it's not material facts that count, it's the attitude. How could I go out there as I went at nineteen?"

He appeared irritable (an unusual state with him), but suddenly shook his head, smiled and stared dreamily at the grass.

"Do you know how I came to leave England first of all?" he murmured.

"No, tell me about it," I replied at once; "you haven't put that in your book."

"In my book? — of course not. It's not the sort of thing you put in books. It was an odd business. I went out with my uncle."

"But how was it?" I asked, noticing that he seemed uncertain whether to speak or not.

"Why, it was like this. I had an Uncle Joe who used to turn up now and then from the most outlandish places. He was a jolly fellow, a great hero with us, but a bad lot really. Went about swindling niggers and so on. Well, we didn't care! So one morning he appears quite unexpectedly at my mother's farm in Yorkshire. And what do you think? — he announces his intention of carrying me off with him to Peru next week. He was going out to sell filters and get concessions — all sorts of things. By Jove, can you imagine my excitement? We twisted my mother round our fingers in no time. She was completely bewildered. By the evening it was all

arranged. I was to go up to London with my uncle at once. Fancy I had never even been in London! Why, never even out of Yorkshire. That night I got hold of our old copy of Prescott. It couldn't be too bloodthirsty for me. . . . I imagined Peru as one mass of gold — gold and parrots. You know the old stamps one used to collect. . . . In three days we were off to London.

"We stayed at a hotel somewhere behind Holborn. My uncle used to spend his days in the city — I explored. Sometimes he would bring back one or two of his friends — men with clipped moustaches and hats at the back of their heads, who smoked cigars, drank whiskey and water, and were incessantly writing in notebooks. My uncle told me that they were his business friends and that I must always show them great consideration. 'They are important men,' he would say in a confidential tone, 'very important; you can't be too polite to them.' Certainly they were the only people I had ever set eyes on who could make my uncle keep comparatively quiet. I respected them accordingly.

"The days passed like lightning. A week went by. On the following morning we were to leave Waterloo for Southampton at ten o'clock. We had made all our purchases — from toothpowder to drill suits. Or rather, I had made them all. My uncle had produced a bag of sovereigns and long paper

The Echo of Voices

lists. I went about with them buying and ticking off. A huge lark — I had £10 for myself over and above. . . . The business friends were in great evidence that night, champagne flowing, and every one very jovial. As usual, no one took much notice of me. I went to bed early but I couldn't sleep. I lay awake all night. . . .

“And the next day — how can I describe it? Have you known what it is to go on board a liner for the first time, to see the white decks towering above you and the passengers lolling over the rails, to jostle and push up the gangway, to feel the ship beneath you, clean, busy, ready for her voyage, to dive down and along the alleyways till a steward opens the cabin door before you, to sink upon the couch beneath the closed port-hole, with that hot, airless ship's smell in your nostrils? Then that first argument with a shore-porter (a villainous breed with husky voices) and the first lunch — all cold beef, salad, pickles and jam-puffs, with the geraniums on the table, and the turmoil of people rushing in and out. And the first glimpse of the drawing-room where some clergyman or other is sure to be trying to write fifty letters before the steamer sails — can all that ever be felt properly but once? Well, I mustn't moralise. . . .

“We had hardly got on board when some typical friends of my uncle appeared from nowhere (it was a

habit they had) and, being thirsty, as usual, took him along with them to the smoking-room. I had lunch by myself and after seeing again that everything was safely in the cabin I went on deck and strolled up and down. We were just preparing to cast off. The last whistle had blown, several women were weeping on the quay, a postman stared up at us with pale, bulging eyes. He was an old man. Perhaps his only son was leaving England. . . . I remember it all. I heard some one call out an order, the gangways were swung clear, the engine-room bell clanged, and slowly, under the guidance of her tug, she edged sideways from the shore. I looked downwards upon the crowd of upturned faces. People were waving, a girl kissed her hand, a cat mewed piteously from a basket, cries of farewell were growing fainter — outward bound at last!

“It was the middle of June. An afternoon like this but clearer. Blue wavelets ruffled the smooth surface. Inshore the paddle-steamers were plying along the Isle of Wight and yachts skimmed in every direction. We passed through the Needles, with the low Hampshire coast fading in the distance, dropped the pilot and, turning, headed down Channel. Already I began to feel at home. I walked about a little and then, going below, found my uncle on the couch calmly reading a French novel. He had opened the port and a delicious breeze filled the cabin. The

The Echo of Voices

throb of the engines, the swish of the tiny waves against the ship, the sight of the blue sky and sparkling water filled me with unspeakable elation. I could have shouted aloud. . . .

“But it didn’t continue like this. About five in the morning we ran into the tail-end of a storm. It was the rolling of the ship that awoke me. The steward had come in in his bare feet and was screwing up the port. (He was a wonderful fellow, this steward of ours, Carrington, a pure black from Nevis, with the most imperturbable manners and as silent as a ghost.) In spite of all my forebodings I didn’t feel one tinge of sea-sickness — I never have. It was broad daylight, of course, and I was only anxious to be up and on deck. My uncle was asleep, and the sea, growing heavier from minute to minute, was beating in great, blinding smashes upon the port. After bearing it as long as I could I got out of my bunk and stumbled across to the bath-room, where a sleepy steward had just come on duty. He was more than surprised to see me. However, he got a bath ready at once and for the first time in my life — yes, believe me, it was so — I plunged into salt water. I must have gone up in the estimation of that steward. If you can stand a cold, salt bath the first morning of a voyage when the boat is rolling twenty degrees — well, you can stand anything. Take it from me. They have a smell of their own these ships’ bath-

Nineteen

rooms, a mixture of brine and steam pipes and soap and hot oil. It does for a good many people.

"When I got on deck there was not a passenger in sight. I received a draught of air such as had never entered my lungs before. And all round the green-white waves were tossing and up above fleecy clouds were scudding across the sky. The wind whistled overhead. The ship rolled so violently that I had to keep making frantic runs half across the deck. Presently from below two people made their appearance, two of the very people I had noticed at our table the night before. One was a dissipated, elderly man with a red nose, red lumps on his forehead, and a protuberant stomach, and the other a girl of seventeen or thereabouts — such a beauty. I was quite taken aback and was beginning to slink round (that's a euphemism) to the other side of the deck when the fat man called out lustily to me —

" 'This is a grand morning, young sir.'

"I blushed quite unnecessarily and, taking advantage of a favourable roll, almost collided with them.

" 'Isn't it?' I gasped. And, turning to the girl, I added, 'Please forgive me; I couldn't help it.'

"She laughed, nodding her head.

" 'Take care, father; don't fall,' she cried, as the fat man tried to steer his way down the deck.

" 'We haven't got our sea-legs yet,' she added gaily.

The Echo of Voices

"I seemed to be growing more speechless every moment.

" 'I say, excuse me; I must go and see how my uncle is,' I blurted out suddenly.

"She smiled in a friendly way; the fat man, balancing himself precariously, half-turned and shouted against the wind, 'Meet again later,' whilst I, hardly knowing what to do, waved my hand and darted down the companion-ladder. I found my uncle still asleep. The cabin was in semi-darkness from the water streaming down the glass and the atmosphere was appalling. But, being an ass, I didn't dare to show my face on deck again before breakfast. I got onto the couch and tried to doze. It was quite unsuccessful. . . . I felt very happy.

"You smile—but what did you expect? At nineteen it's very simple. Why, I could have shown you the whole world in a nutshell. Look, just like this! Do you know that I haven't thought of that voyage for years and years. Yet I see it now as I speak, see the faces turned to me and the breaking waves, hear the voices. . . . And that girl, Priscilla—Priscilla Goodenough—! I made great friends with her in a few days. It happened like this. My uncle couldn't bear her father—no one could—and always treated him with icy politeness. This wasn't at all like him, for he was the best-natured man on earth. Still there it was

— and it was very marked. It appears that old Goodenough wanted to join a poker party which my uncle had got together in the smoke-room and that my uncle wouldn't have him. Not at any price. There had been words of some sort — nothing much. The old man had positively wept — he was never quite sober — and had made a speech in which he said that he hoped he had always behaved like a gentleman and always would.

“A silly business! Unfortunately his daughter had got wind of it and came to me for the full story. (You know, I had tried at meals and so on to show that I didn't share my uncle's dislike. As a matter of fact, I did — however, you can understand.) Her father was in very low spirits, she said. He would only tell her things in fragments but she gathered that there had been some unpleasantness between him and my uncle. She wasn't excusing her father. It was easy to blame him — nobody was perfect, he least of all — but he was getting old. ‘He is not what he was,’ she murmured. I was terribly embarrassed. Should I speak to my uncle? I asked. She looked at me with liquid eyes. Oh, if only I would! Her father was so easily upset, it was so hard to know what to do, etc., etc. I felt that I had her confidence.

“‘All right; I'll speak before lunch,’ I assured her, looking away. (This was the fourth day out.)

The Echo of Voices

"But now something very odd happened. As I was going down the deck towards the companion-ladder I ran into old Goodenough, who was lying in wait for me outside the door of his cabin. He beckoned to me with elaborate secrecy. I could do nothing but approach.

"'Will you oblige me, young sir, by coming in here for an instant?' he asked in a whisper.

"He looked solemn. Of course, I thought at once that he had seen me talking to his daughter ('Prissy,' as he called her) and meant to read me a lesson. Very uncomfortable for me. . . .

"His cabin was a single-berth one. As soon as we entered he carefully closed the door, pulled the curtain across the window, and struck a light. (He'd have made his fortune in a melodrama.) All this time my knees were knocking together. He placed a chair for me and asked me to be seated.

II

"'Young Mr. Brownlow,' he began, 'my dear young friend, you can help me with your good advice.' (He was obviously rather drunk and smelt of spirits.) 'My dear friend — my dear friend — but first tell me what you think of this rum — the finest Jamaica, very old!' He produced a bottle from somewhere and poured out two glasses. 'Come,

I drink to you — I know you are going to make a name for yourself — but, my dear friend, tell me, what am I to do? Your excellent uncle — believe me, I would do anything. I am a man of the most friendly disposition. Just think! For forty years — yes, forty-two years — back and forwards on this very line — and now — what am I to do? ”

“ He was working himself up into a state of maudlin despair.

“ ‘ What am I to do? ’ he repeated, wringing his hands.

“ You can imagine how awful this was for me. I was in utter confusion.

“ ‘ I’ll — I’ll speak to my uncle,’ I stammered, not even pretending to misunderstand him; ‘ no doubt — or, rather, perhaps — at any rate I’ll do my best.’

“ One really had to treat him like a child. He didn’t seem to have an ounce of pride. His red, tipsy face quivered with emotion. Tears started into his eyes. He murmured a few disjointed words of thanks. But all the same it appeared to me that there was a certain slyness about his expression. He was evidently anxious for me to be gone.

“ I was only too pleased to get out on deck again. I was oppressed by the thought that this was probably a preconcerted plan between father and daughter. However, as there seemed no way of finding that out except by direct challenge to the girl (an

The Echo of Voices

impossible proceeding) I went straight down to the cabin, feeling very miserable. It was half an hour before lunch. My uncle was installed on the couch reading his interminable French novel (full of improper illustrations) and I tackled him at once.

“‘Do you know, Uncle, that poor Miss Good-enough is very upset about you and her father?’

“My uncle burst out laughing.

“‘Eh, my boy,’ what does the poor girl say?’ he replied mockingly.

“I told him.

“‘Well, Ted, you give her a kiss and say that it’ll be all right.’

“I felt more than ever as though I had put my head into a hornet’s nest — still, it was rather thrilling.

“‘You mean you’ll let him play, Uncle, and — and speak to him at table?’ I answered seriously.

“This sent my uncle into further roars of laughter.

“‘Why, the fellow’s a regular advocate!’ he shouted. ‘It’s the petticoats, Ted. You’d better take care.’

“Of course I furiously denied it.

“‘Watch me at lunch,’ said my uncle in the greatest good humour. ‘Only he mustn’t get too drunk — I draw the line there.’

“I had to be content with that. I was very glad

Nineteen

I hadn't said a word about the other interview. I slipped out of the cabin and ran up on deck. I found Miss Goodenough where I had left her.

" 'I've seen my uncle,' I began hastily. 'There's been some misunderstanding, but I've cleared it away.'

"What a glance she gave me! 'I knew you would,' she murmured, putting out her hand.

"But at that very moment the cursed thought of the whole thing being a plot surged up and dashed all my pleasure.

"Despair made me suddenly reckless.

" 'Do tell me — it wasn't your father who asked you to ask me?' I muttered.

" 'What, has he been speaking to you?' she answered quickly.

" ('That means it was,' I thought, looking at her with anger.)

" 'Yes,' I replied.

"She closed her eyes and shuddered.

" 'I couldn't have stood against that, could I?' 'But, Miss Goodenough, why shouldn't he?' I added gently. 'I ought not to have put that question. He only asked me if he had offended my uncle. Of course he hadn't. It's all settled now.'

"She gave her head a mournful shake.

" 'Yes, but I know him,' she insisted, sighing heavily. 'He humiliates himself — it's so wretched, and

The Echo of Voices

for me, too. I had no idea that he had any such intention. I would have warned you, of course. You must think badly of us.'

"Really I could have thrown myself into the sea I felt such a scoundrel. I gazed at her. I was speechless.

" 'Never mind, never mind,' she said, frowning as though to keep back her tears. . . .

"That was how our friendship began. Yes, I can see her now standing there looking strangely at me, tapping with her little foot on the deck. That same afternoon she told me a lot about herself. Her father was a sugar planter in —, a very rich man. His family had made their fortune in the old slavery days. 'We were as well known throughout the islands as the Beckfords,' she added proudly. (I remember giving an incredulous start at this information, though, to speak truly, I had never heard of the Beckfords before.) Her father, she went on to tell me, was a widower and she was his only child. He had come over to fetch her from a convent in Milan where she had been for three years. He was a kind father to her, would do anything for her, buy her anything, but she hardly seemed to know him after all this time. He was an altered man. Her lip quivered as she spoke of him. It was being alone so much, she thought, and he was getting old, too, and altogether it was a bad look-out. But then,

perhaps, it would be different now. Did I not think so? I nodded emphatically, but I must admit that she gave utterance to the hope without conviction. It was a sort of conventional aside. I listened to her with the most eager sympathy. I had never seen such a girl.

“Well, you know how these things go on board ship. Friendships spring up very suddenly. A smile, a few polite words, an endless conversation — how quickly they follow one another! And as for me — how can I tell you what I felt? Everything seemed changed. I ran about the ship, laughing, talking to all I met. My uncle was vastly amused. Let him be — I didn’t care, not a bit! And the sea grew calm and the air warm, and every night the stars glittered more brightly. Ah, that was when we talked! She would fetch a light wrap from her cabin and come fluttering along the deck like a moth. We leant over the rail and we saw the sea phosphorescent beneath us and the undulating reflections of the stars. Not a tremor shook the masts outlined darkly against the sky. It was wonderful. She would tell me about her home and about the negroes singing in the dusk and about the frogs bubbling amongst the reeds. I listened. A new world opened at my feet.

“‘Go on, tell me more,’ I urged her; ‘tell me everything.’

The Echo of Voices

But all at once she would stop.

“‘Wait for me; I must go and look after father.’

“I waited, cursing her father. Truly a most detestable old man! I must explain that no sooner had he been received back into the fold (if you can call a poker party a fold) than he began to assume a distant and mysterious air. No more confidential whispers, no, indeed, but only elaborate bows and clearings of the throat. I need hardly say that he avoided all reference to our former conversation. I was thankful but rather hurt. He had evidently dismissed the whole affair. Oh, yes, I can quite understand. After all he had not behaved in a dignified way and it became more and more evident that dignity was his chief *forte*. He used to irritate my poor uncle almost to madness, but I must say he bore it very well. (He, too, was a great admirer of Priscilla.) Sometimes, however, when he came into the cabin very late from a game of poker there would be a fine to-do. Old Goodenough had been making ‘personal explanations’ all the evening. My uncle would tear off his clothes, fuming and stamping. ‘It’s poker, not parliament!’ he would exclaim wrathfully; ‘besides, I wish he wouldn’t breathe in my face.’ Then he would add sardonically, ‘And it’s all owing to you, my son.’ But at breakfast the next morning he would treat the old man in that

Nineteen

heartly way of his which endeared him to every one — even to the niggers he swindled, I daresay. Mr. Goodenough never unbent. In courteous phrases he would wish my uncle ‘A very good morning and to you, young sir, another day of enjoyment.’ Of course, it was absurd — especially as he was always the first to arrive at the poker table (he used to carry about with him two of the greasiest pack of cards I have ever seen), and even at that early hour smelt of spirits to a certain modified extent. As my uncle used to say, ‘You could tell what the time was when he breathed on you.’

“Yes, it was absurd and rather pathetic. I suppose he imagined he was regaining his dignity. I would catch in his eyes occasionally that sly, watchful look I had noticed before. And yet there was another man beneath all this, beneath the drunkard, beneath the bore — the man his daughter used to know and still love. For she did still love him. It was self-evident. You could see the look of pain when he made himself ridiculous. She treated him with great gentleness. She would defer to him in his most sententious moments. She had the gift of tact, the tact which conceals pity. And even to me, after that one confidence which had been, as it were, torn from her, she never alluded to him with anything but affection. ‘Dear Father,’ she would say, ‘he leans on me a great deal.’ She would smile, but without a

The Echo of Voices

trace of condescension. 'I have been away too long — I shan't leave him any more.' . . .

III

"But where am I? Oh, yes, I was telling you how she would go off suddenly to see what her father was doing. Of course, she knew what he was doing quite well — he was playing poker. But she liked to run into the smoking-room for an instant to give him a cheery word. She was that sort of girl. Presently she would return and we would continue our talk. We would stroll up and down or sit in a sheltered part of the deck. I would speak to her of our farm, of cows, and rabbits, of bathing in the peaty streams, and of tickling little trout. The sing-song voice of the man in the bows would resound, the bells would strike, and the late moon, rising gloriously over the sea, would illuminate a phantom ship. How time slipped away from us! Soon the stars would wane and the air, growing cooler, would caress our cheeks as though with the breath of dawn.

" 'I must go now,' she would murmur at last.

" 'No, not yet,' I would answer. 'Why must you go?'

"Slowly she would shake her head and, rising, look upon me for a second and be gone.

"All was still. Like a great silver ingot the moonlight lay heavy upon the water. The ship slum-

Nineteen

bered and the even beating of her heart mingled in my ears with the low murmur of the sea.

"You must not run away with the idea that we made love to one another — not consciously. No such word crossed our lips. Long after she had gone below I would sit there thinking of her and of her home. Only a few days more and I should be there myself. A few days . . . I shivered with joy. I was not sleepy. I closed my eyes and before me the whole, boundless world seemed to await my coming, seemed to smile. . . . I would be roused out of this reverie by the sound of voices raised in altercation. The smoking-room door would bang, glasses jangle, and above the hubbub a dignified, protesting voice — silence — an unpleasant laugh. I would get up, scowling with annoyance. Old Goodenough had been making another scene. . . .

"We were popular, my uncle and I. I'm sure of that. I spent many an hour in the officers' cabins, hearing the stories of their lives, looking at faded photographs and at others not at all faded and hardly respectable. They were a good set. They talked about the islands and of the girls they knew. They used to spin extremely long, vague, and pointless yarns about spare afternoons in Southampton. But then, too, they would speak of Trinidad and Caracas, of warm, scented nights, and of banjo serenades. Think of it!

The Echo of Voices

"The days sped by. I knew every one on board, officers and passengers alike. There were no idle minutes for me. I rose early and I went to bed late. I slept like a top. I had never known such a feeling of health. We got down to the region of azure seas and flying fish, where great flat skates leap out of the ocean and the Sargasso weed trails upon the water. The saloon was like an oven. We almost lived on deck. In the afternoon we would play cricket and make a rush for the cold baths. It was useless — one perspired anew before one had finished drying. Trifles! Others might care — I didn't. Wasn't the whole world before me? Besides it would be night again soon. I would wave to Priscilla, sitting cool and fair in her green linen dress. We would meet. . . .

"In the long hour before dinner the decks were deserted. The whole West suddenly flamed and the sun fell, like a burning rocket, into the sea. Night had come, the swift night of the Tropics, and the stars, rushing out over the sky, seemed to expand and glow before the breath of an invisible bellows. I would watch, entranced. From beneath people would emerge, one by one, and, pointing here and there, would make suitable comments. But at the sound of the bugle they disappeared like a flock of sheep — I, also, to be quite frank. We ate our dinners with relish. Knives clattered; people discussed the af-

fairs of the voyage, laughing good-naturedly. But somehow I could never talk to Priscilla at meals. I avoided her eye. I let my uncle do all the speaking. He would tell us stories — old Goodenough would nod, clearing his throat. The doctor at the head of the table invariably thought that he saw an *arrière pensée*, and would half choke in the middle of a mouthful. It was no use my uncle assuring him in private that there had been none — not the least good. ‘You’ll be the death of me,’ he would exclaim rapturously; ‘what a man, what a man!’ (He was one of the rarer types of ship’s doctor, an obese middle-aged man who had spent most of his life at sea — not one of your novices or land-failures, but a real personality.)

“And then the nights. . . . She spoke — I listened to her voice telling me of the South. It was always of the South, never of Milan. She had intuition. . . .

“But at length, ah, all too soon, there came the time when I had to say to her, ‘To-morrow we shall be watching for your lights.’

“‘Yes,’ she answered, and nothing more.

“A chill seemed to have fallen. Should I speak of parting? I wondered. No, not yet. I must put it out of my mind. I did — fortunate nineteen!

“I will tell you about our last night. . . . Eight bells had just struck. It was very dark and warm,

The Echo of Voices

and so still was the whole sea that the stars seemed to hang motionless above the ship. She went on at half-speed as silently as a cat, while the grizzled quartermaster, who had been collecting deck-chairs with an expression of profound contempt, slowly stretched his arms, and, spitting over the side, stumped away forward. The officer of the watch, silhouetted clearly against the sky, stopped for an instant to gaze downwards, and then, resuming his march, disappeared leisurely behind the shadow of the wheel-house.

“ We had observed them from a nook of the deck, screened by a boat. It was I who had been doing the speaking. I felt in a strange, exultant mood. The nearness of the shore, the sight of the girl sitting there with downcast eyes and hands folded in her lap, the stillness around, the gleam of her white dress — it was an intoxication. I had been telling her about myself in a way I had never done before. Softly and rapidly I was whispering. The silence terrified me and filled me with joy. I had an extraordinary wish to tell her every desire and thought in my heart — above all not to stop, but to go on and on. Do you know, I felt that if I were to stop I might begin to cry !

“ First love, do you say? — well, perhaps. But it seems to me that it was a more complicated emotion than that. It was as though I felt the first

Nineteen

breath of the tropics on my cheek, the first breath . . . do you understand? But Priscilla — she sat there listening to me, not moving. She was part of the spell. She was the Fairy Princess of a vision. You know how young girls can sit and listen to you and you see them smiling very faintly and it's exactly as if they had some thought which you could never understand. That was Priscilla. But at last she spoke, gently and slowly, and, raising her eyes, she let them fall upon me like a beam.

“‘Why do you tell me all this? To-morrow is good-bye for us.’

“‘But it's not true. We're not going to say good-bye. I shall come again.’

“She shook her head.

“‘Listen to me,’ I protested. ‘I swear to come again.’

“But once more she shook her head as she asked me, ‘Are you to spend a night on the island?’

“‘Yes, at the hotel. My uncle has arranged it.’

“‘Then will you — will you come and see me?’ she murmured.

“At your house? Oh, may I?’

“I simply couldn't find words.

“She had risen and gone before I knew what had happened.

“‘Yes, I shall come back again,’ I repeated to myself.

The Echo of Voices

"And suddenly I heard a shout. I sprang up and, peering ahead, I saw a red light like a star upon the east. Some one passed me on deck, calling over his shoulder, 'Why, we're there!' We must have slowed completely down, for we seemed to be only creeping through the water. The light, growing larger, appeared to swing round and hide behind us. Other lights started from the sea, and in the distance a dim mass of rock or forest rose and put out the stars. A wind came off the land, sweet, exotic, full of wild and earthy smells.

"We anchored in the open roadstead. A little tug waddled out from the port, her quick, feverish beats echoing over the bay, and some one standing up in the bows exchanged words with our captain. Then some one else, dressed all in white with a pith helmet, suddenly jumped up by his side and called out in a stentorian voice, 'Have you got Mrs. Gregory on board?' I don't know what answer was given, but I know I burst out laughing. Fancy, coming from that mysterious land to ask if Mrs. Gregory was on board! Preposterous!

"But presently the tug steamed off and the ship, riding at anchor, rested all silent and secure. I was feeling sleepy at last — the lights smouldered upon the shore — every sound was hushed. Time for bed. . . .

"I woke at the very hour of sunrise and, scram-

Nineteen

bling out of my bunk, dressed and ran up on deck. Never shall I forget that moment. The whole island lay before me in the pale light of dawn. Clear, fragile, beautiful beyond words, it was like a mirage that would pass away at a breath. The sea reflected it upon its cold surface and all the palms upon the jutting sand rose stiff and motionless as the trees of a Dutch landscape. The forest had a primrose tint and the red-white houses along the shore stood out like painted toys.

“ ‘A morning for the gods, young sir,’ said a hateful voice behind me.

“I spun round and saw before me the crimson countenance of Mr. Goodenough. He was still in his evening clothes and must have been playing cards all night. I suppose that every fairy story has its ogre, but there is something particularly distasteful about an ogre that smells of rum in the purity of the dawn.

“ ‘The home of my youth,’ he added grandiloquently, flourishing his hand, ‘and here I shall die, please God.’

“ ‘. . . please God,’ I echoed below my breath.

“He left me with a bow, but the spell was broken. The ogre had done his work. I stepped below and lay down on the couch.

IV

"A few hours later, when I went up with my uncle, all was changed. The day had risen in splendor. Boats full of negroes surrounded the ship, every passenger seemed to be on deck, people were shouting, making arrangements, exchanging farewells. Stewards were piling luggage on the after deck, an old lady was loudly bewailing the loss of a green purse, a parrot in a cage was screaming. It was pandemonium. My uncle, who was in his element in this sort of thing, went from group to group cracking jokes. Then, calling on me to follow him, he elbowed his way to the dining-saloon. There, at our table, we found the Goodenoughs having a last breakfast. Old Goodenough had got himself up in a grey suit and a magnificent white topper. It gave him quite a commanding presence, especially as you saw a great expanse of linen waistcoat. My uncle clapped him on the shoulder, full of good humour at the thought of getting rid of him. Priscilla, who had not looked up from her plate, suddenly rose and went out of the saloon. I hesitated a moment, then, seeing that my uncle and her father were talking energetically at one end of the table, I followed her. She was waiting for me outside.

"'I wanted to give you this,' she said, quite simply.

"It was a scrap of paper with the name of her father's plantation on it.

" 'To-night,' I answered, holding her hand for an instant.

" 'There is a gate opposite the very end of the point,' she said, looking away.

" 'At six o'clock.'

" 'Yes, at six.'

" 'And I shall come again, you know,' I added.

"She gave me suddenly a stern and inquiring glance.

" 'What are they worth, all these promises of yours?' she muttered passionately. 'Don't make them! Only — only, to-night!'

"She frowned and went away from me without another word.

"I did not move till I heard my uncle calling for me again. We were to go on shore at once, in time for breakfast. So presently we were in a boat (I carrying a little bag that held our clothes for the night) and were being rowed by two darkies across the bay. I let my hand ripple in the blue water. The darkies jabbered, their ebony bodies glistening through their cotton rags, while my uncle, lying well back in the stern, drew in deep, luxurious breaths and stretched himself at ease. But I—I simply devoured the shore. As it drew nearer it shaped itself into a tiny harbour with clustering warehouses

The Echo of Voices

and a crowd of gesticulating negroes upon the quay. A mingling of bright colours gave an air of gaiety to those dark and smiling ranks. It was the face of a new world, the world of my dreams, more thrilling to me than all the ruins of ancient civilisation. We landed at some wooden steps and in a few minutes were in a narrow, winding street full of grocers' and drapers' stores. Laden donkeys walked sedately upon the stone cobbles, a Chinese gentleman in gold spectacles and a brown suit sat very upright in a buggy driven by a negro groom, a big policeman shouted at some negresses carrying baskets of washing on their heads. Flamboyant advertisements covered every shop window, and all the chille sellers on the pavement were gabbling like so many geese. The face of a new world indeed!

" 'We'll go to Thorpe's,' said my uncle, as though it were the most ordinary proceeding.

" We suddenly cut down to our left and emerged from the street of cobbles into one of white loam, full of sticky and cloying smells.

" 'Here we are,' said my uncle, entering a warehouse whose subdued light showed a row of bulging sacks in a far corner. We crossed it, mounted a rickety staircase, and found ourselves in a big room furnished with a bar, a few tables and several brass spittoons. Through the green jalousies rays of shimmering light fell across the floor. Behind the

Nineteen

bar a seedy-looking Italian was dusting bottles.

“‘You just wait,’ whispered my uncle, as though he expected me to be disappointed. Then going up to the bar he roared like a bull, ‘Hey, Alberto, you son of a gun, you remember me, don’t you?’

“Alberto spun around and almost fell into his arms with joy.

“My uncle plied him with questions.

“‘Well, now, get us something to eat,’ he wound up; ‘grill us some of those flying-fish of yours, and, I say, Alberto, make us some lime-squashes, big ones — you know.’

“Alberto fled, while my uncle, walking like a king across the room, rolled up one of the blinds and sat down in the sunlight.

“‘That’s the way to do it, Ted,’ he observed calmly.

“Ah, and we had a breakfast, too! Flying-fish caught that morning seven miles from shore, soft, spongy bread of the tropics and Danish butter from a tin, fresh lime-squashes, sucked up slowly through coarse straws, and then, at the finish, pulpy mangoes smelling of pine needles.

“‘We’ll go for a drive now,’ said my uncle. ‘Alberto, be a good fellow; run down and get us a carriage.’

“Alberto went like a streak.

“‘That man would fetch the devil for me if I

The Echo of Voices

asked him,' exclaimed my uncle; 'what shall I give him?' He winked at me. 'There are two secrets of willing service,' he added, digging me in the ribs, 'one's good nature and the other's good money. Remember that, my son.'

"Alberto got us a carriage in no time — a sort of ramshackle landau, driven by an old darkie wearing spectacles and pulled by two yellowy-white horses with all their ribs showing. Never mind, it did us very well! We drove out into the country in great style. We saw sugar fields and palms waving on the beach and glimpses of coral reefs and shelving seas. And we saw the little wooden homesteads, with their swarms of startled pickaninnies, and their black pigs, and their grubbing hens. And away beyond, the green hills, covered with bush, rose against the cloudless sky. The dust flew and the flies buzzed round us in the heat. The road wound between banks or like a broad highway above the fields, dazzling white and glistening afar like a metal ribbon. Lizards basked upon stones and painted birds flashed before us with discordant cries.

"'Drive us right out to Gunaway's,' shouted my uncle at last.

"The driver grinned, cracked his whip, gave a terrific whoop, and the miserable horses broke into a shambling gallop. In a short time we arrived before a square, unadorned hotel built near the sea

and looking, though not at all new, as if it had been left by the workmen before it had been properly finished off. A lot of little black, starling-like birds were walking cheekily up and down outside the veranda. They all rose together as a tall, stout man with a squint came down the steps to meet us.

“‘You’ve arrived by the boat, gentlemen,’ he announced, rather with the air of saying, ‘Now don’t deny it — I know everything.’

“‘You’re right, Mr. Gunaway,’ answered my uncle; ‘but you haven’t forgotten me, have you?’

“Mr. Gunaway spat with great deliberation.

“‘No, mister, I haven’t forgotten you — I don’t forget anybody — but I can’t — er — can’t place you.’

“My uncle went up to him, took him by the arm, and walked away with him a few yards. In a couple of minutes they came back smiling broadly.

“‘. . . and so it was you — well, I always suspected — through the bank, you know — Port of Spain — a piece of luck . . .’ I overheard. It was Gunaway who had been speaking. Whom hadn’t my uncle done business with in his time?

“‘Ted,’ said he, joining me again, ‘Mr. Gunaway will give us some lunch presently.’ He nudged the hotelkeeper. We had a lunch once, didn’t we, Gunaway,’ he added slyly. Both men laughed.

“‘Well, gentlemen, I must leave you now,’ said

The Echo of Voices

Gunaway; 'pray make yourselves at home till lunch-time.'

"He walked back into the house.

" 'Would you believe it, Ted,' said my uncle as we watched his retreating form, 'that fellow's got some of the finest sparkling burgundy you ever tasted.'

"We strolled about for some time and then returned to the hall and sat on bamboo chairs and read ancient numbers of *The Graphic*. It was the off season in the island and there seemed to be no visitors in the hotel. 'So much the better,' said my uncle. If it had been full he would have made precisely the same remark. He was optimistic by nature. We were favoured at luncheon by the company of Mr. Gunaway and his wife—a woman with enormous hips and a pale, freckled face. It wasn't a bad meal, though Mrs. Gunaway did nothing to help the conversation except to remark, with considerable heat, that the pickled onions had been opened for too long, and though Gunaway and my uncle had some joke which I couldn't fathom in the least, but which I am pretty certain referred to a monetary transaction in the past. No, it wasn't the company I liked; it was the food and the silent darkie of a waiter with his pale palms and crinkled hair. We drank several bottles of the famous burgundy. Heady stuff it was, too! I was glad enough to lie down after lunch. There, in a sort of trance, I rested on my bed listen-

ing to the chatter of the tropicals. This, then, was the Tropics! Just to think of it gave me an incredulous sensation. Impossible! I got up, walked on tiptoe across the room, and pulling aside a corner of the blind, I saw the island and the sea lying bright and still in the fierce glare. It was like a sudden revelation of something I had never seen before. The Tropics!

"I dozed at last, only to wake up in a perspiration. Some thought or other was troubling me. Yes, what was it that had come like that into my sleep? I sat up on the edge of the bed, staring at the floor. And all at once I remembered — Priscilla. I was overwhelmed with shame. I had forgotten all about her till then. I recalled the tone of her voice, the look of her eyes. Her girlish figure seemed to haunt the shadowy room. 'I am to meet her at six,' I thought, smiling blissfully. 'Yes, this is love,' I continued to myself. 'It would be impossible to live without her.' The very hint of such a thing made me shiver. 'Good God, how I love her!' I whispered.

"I jumped up, ran downstairs and demanded of the nigger in the hall how I should get to the point. He assumed a worried and dejected appearance (I had come upon him in what seemed an attitude of profound thought, but which was, I fear, the stillness of complete vacuity), but after I had repeated

The Echo of Voices

the question half a dozen times he suddenly appeared to wake up, and showing me all his teeth in one colossal grin.

“‘Why, massa, you follow dat dere road along de coast and den when you come to de point — why, dere you are at de point.’

“I thanked him and was turning back from the veranda when whom should I see being driven towards us than the ship’s doctor? His fat, jolly form quite filled the little seat of the buggy and he was mopping his face with a huge bandana.

“‘Hulloa, doctor,’ I shouted; ‘have you come up to have tea with us?’

“‘Tea! — Oh, Lord, in my state! Soda-water, you mean. But where’s that uncle of yours? Look here, I’ve important news for you. I’ve come to warn you that they’ve changed the sailing hour. We’re off to-night at ten o’clock.’

“‘At ten o’clock?’ I muttered.

“He lifted himself painfully out of his seat and advanced up the steps.

“‘Well, where’s your uncle?’ he repeated, laughing at my look of consternation.

“I told him that I didn’t rightly know where he was, as I had been lying down, but that if he would sit there on the veranda I would go and search for him. ‘All in good time,’ he said, ‘he’ll turn up before long. What a man! Not letting the grass

Nineteen

grow, I'll be bound. Ah, thank goodness!' he concluded, as he sank into a chair.

V

"We sat there overlooking the road, a field of mealies and the curving sea. I ordered drinks. I was glad to see the old doctor, but I kept an inward eye on the time. Well, it was only half-past four as yet. He began to tell me an endless story about some Roumanian Jewess he used to know in Singapore ('What a girl she was!'), though why he should have wanted to tell me I can't conceive. He kept wiping his face and puffing out his cheeks. I hardly listened to him, because I was thinking to myself, 'Suppose she's not there?' It was an absolutely terrible idea. The thought of having to leave that night had, you know, suddenly brought parting frightfully close. I felt oppressed by sadness. . . .

"The doctor meandered on about his reminiscences, covering, as you might say, the face of the globe. He had known beautiful women in every country and he had adored them all. 'Ah, well, they pass out of one's life.' (He was inclined to be sentimental this afternoon.) Gradually I found myself listening more and more attentively. There was much that was extraordinarily soothing in all this to my new philosophy. 'Yes, one has to be a fatalist,' I thought to myself. At nineteen there is

The Echo of Voices

something enticing about the sadness of farewell. Beautiful women whom one has loved and who are but memories, the glamour of far-off lands, the march of time — with what exquisite melancholy the image of them can fill romantic youth! I was in a frame of mind (since about half an hour) to give up Priscilla for the sheer luxury of remembrance.

“In a short time my uncle arrived, full of energy and very thirsty. He greeted the doctor with a mighty shout and heard the news of our departure with complacency. Would you believe it, he had been bathing! He had met there, on the beach, a most incredible person in the shape of a Nonconformist clergyman who had got into earnest conversation with him about the ‘conversion’ (as he named it) of the Catholic blacks in San Domingo. My uncle had given him a sovereign towards the cause. It sounds mere hypocrisy, of course, but it wasn’t; it was simply the good nature of over-bounding vitality. They had parted the best of friends. You can guess what a story he managed to make of it!

“‘Well, I’m going for a walk myself,’ said I at last, getting up as unconcernedly as I could.

“They let me go without a question, my uncle only observing, ‘Dinner at 7:30. I’ll keep the doc. We can all go down together.’

“In half a minute I was out of their sight round a corner of the hotel. I followed the road which

dipped to the sea and skirted the shingly mud of the foreshore. What little tide there was had ebbed, and black, spidery crabs were scurrying over the slime in all directions. The first cicadas of the night were waking in the cotton fields. The air, cooled by the evening breeze, gave off a new fragrance. Far out the sun glinted upon the unbared coral reefs, and I could hear the torpid sea rolling on them with a sort of suppressed, booming noise. There is no real twilight in the Tropics, but the brilliance fades from the upper sky and a violet glow fills all the darkening world. It is a mysterious time that comes with great swiftness and melting suddenly into deep night. The hour for lovers, you think. Yes, but deceptive like love itself, and, like love, fleeting and too soon overcast. . . . I won't soliloquise. . . .

"I got to the point. The jungle had been allowed to grow unfettered around it. A tangled mass of undergrowth bulged over the fencing and almost hid the wicket gate facing the sea. In this artificial reservation of Tropical nature you might have imagined yourself in the Brazilian wilderness. I cannot tell you how strange it felt to be standing there. I undid the latch and passed through the gate into a winding path. Beyond its further edge I could see green lawns, a bamboo swamp and a long, low building backed by great red-flowering trees. A multitude of frogs were calling from the bamboos. I

The Echo of Voices

stood and waited, quite overcome with trembling. I felt that she, my beloved, was near me, though invisible to my sight. All at once, very close, I heard a rustling, and, turning on my heel, I saw her before me.

“‘So you’ve come!’ she said in no friendly voice.

“‘I nodded, breathing quickly.

“‘You took the appointment seriously, after all?’ she continued.

“‘I was quite dumfounded by her tone. It was really too awful. I stared at her like a sheep.

“‘You haven’t lost your voice, have you?’ she asked. ‘Oh, how silly it all seems!’

“‘But why did you ask me to come, then?’ I stammered.

“‘Listen to him! He’s a schoolboy. Whoever hear such nonsense! Do you hear,’ she added furiously, ‘you’re just a schoolboy!’

“‘But I suddenly knew quite well that all this meant nothing at all. I took her hand and I said, ‘Why do you talk to me like this — Priscilla?’

“‘I had never called her Priscilla before.

“‘At these words of mine the cloak seemed to fall from her as night from morning.

“‘You — you — to-night — your steamer,’ she gasped in a choking voice.

“‘Yes, but I shall return.’

“‘No, no — Ted,’ she answered mournfully and

Nineteen

shyly, 'the sea is too big.' She shivered. 'There — do you hear it? It's washing over the reef. Listen to it now! Listen! It will be in my ears night and day. It's desolate, desolate, like I am.'

"'Priscilla, dear, this is not the end,' I murmured.

"She did not notice my words, but she suddenly smiled.

"'I never thought you would come,' she whispered tenderly, 'I had given up hope. And then, seeing you like this — oh, don't, don't!'

"She did not withdraw her hand, which I had begun to kiss, but, bending sideways, she let her tears fall upon the ground.

"It had grown dark apace, and through the branches of the thicket the sky appeared deep blue and crowded with stars. The whole night of the Tropics was awake with thousands of stridulating insects and golden flies.

"'Come with me on to the beach,' I said to her.

"And there, upon the firm sand, we sat for an hour that went quickly as a minute. Oh, elusive happiness! Only a minute and I was watching her, lonely and white, against the blackness of the sea. Only a minute. It was all over. Turning, I fled blindly from her down the road.

"It was nearly eight when I got back to the hotel. All distraught as I was, I ran up to my room,

The Echo of Voices

threw everything into the bag, plunged my face in water and rushed downstairs to the dining-room. My uncle and the doctor had nearly finished. I mumbled some excuse about having lost my way and, as they hadn't suspected anything, they probably believed me. We sat at a table opposite French windows that had been thrown wide open. Two blacks, dressed in spotless duck, with serious and preoccupied faces, waited upon us. The murmur of the night filled the room, and in the outer darkness fireflies were glimmering in the poinsettia bushes. A faint breeze stirred like a fan.

"My uncle was telling the doctor a breathless story about how he had once interviewed the King of Dahomey. I know for certain that there was not a word of truth in it, though why he should have been at the trouble to invent it is a psychological puzzle, as he actually had done just as exciting things. But perhaps it was simply a way of working off superfluous energy. Anyhow, it was lucky for me, as it kept them from noticing my agitation. They went on talking and smoking cigars while I hurried through the different courses. After a time we heard the clatter of a carriage at the front steps.

" 'That'll be for us,' said my uncle; 'you go and see, Ted, and get the bag down.'

"The doctor was so absorbed in the story that he merely grunted and wiped his forehead. I'm sure

he'd have been quite prepared to miss the boat. When I came back in a minute to tell them that it *was* our carriage and that everything was ready, he was asking my uncle whether he had seen many handsome women in Dahomey. Incurrigible man!

"The proprietor saw us off. His manner was affability itself. 'Come again,' he shouted after us, and then in a louder voice, 'I'm always to be relied on.' I was sitting beside the driver, but I could hear the chuckle my uncle gave. 'Some new plan or other,' I thought astutely. Well, maybe, but I never head anything more.

"Contrary to the usual habit of negroes the driver looked neither to the right hand nor the left. We passed into the darkness at a hand-gallop and made for the lights of the town. Who can forget such things? The magic of the night flowed over me, drowning my despair in a delicious numbness. A sense of mysterious good seemed to lie upon the world and to soften all our hearts. We crossed the outskirts. Far drawn back from the road dim lights shone in the houses of the rich and voices echoed musically from open windows. Negroes were singing upon the paths, marching homewards from their toil. And as we drew nearer and nearer to the town there arose shouts of laughter, incomprehensible cries, the barking of dogs. Naked feet shuffled and forms moved indistinctly in the gloom. The mad world of

The Echo of Voices

an Inferno! But all at once glimpses of the bay, aglow with riding-lights and majestic in its still splendour, appeared through the gaps of the houses. The smell of the sea came strongly to us above the sugary smell of the streets. And overhead the night of the Tropics, starry, without a moon, without a cloud, showed, in the deep sky, the two Southern Crosses. Yes, I shall never forget it. We drove straight down to the quay and, putting off from shore, we reached our ship just as ten was striking. . . . That is all. . . .”

VI

Brownlow ceased and in the darkness which had almost swallowed us I heard him sigh deeply.

“No,” he continued at last, “there is no recapturing days like that. I see the long vista of ten years’ wanderings pivoted upon that little island. It trails from it with a dwindling thread, never broken but growing thinner and thinner. But now, if I were to return, everything would snap, everything would dissolve, everything, all the glow of memory, all the feelings of youth and romance. I’m sure of it, I’m under no delusions. But as it is, I remember — isn’t that enough?”

He stopped again and I heard him shifting in his seat. Neither of us spoke for several minutes. In the far-off valley a mist had spread itself upon the

low margin of the river. The young moon was rising above the hills, beautiful, soft, gilding the night sky. The air was chilly and my feet were damp in the dewy grass. I got up and stretched myself.

"That's a strange vivid yarn of yours, Ted," I remarked.

"Perhaps it is," he answered, "and sad, too, as I think of it. Do you realise she would be nearly fifty years old? She was such a slip of a girl. Priscilla! Yes, nearly fifty. I never saw her again. Of course not. If I had I wouldn't be thinking of her now. But here, as I shut my eyes, I see her standing against the gloomy sea, uncomforted to the last, a tragic figure. What a fool I was! She probably married some beastly rum-swilling brute. A sort of old Goodenough. Don't I hear her whispering forlornly to me, 'I lose you,' and my confident reply, 'And I—I find you forever.' Good Lord!"

He sighed.

"The most curious thing about memory," he continued in a musing tone, "is the thought of passionate hearts stilled forever. Sitting here I conjure up for an instant a vanished world, dead eyes burn brightly, lips smile, and an imagined scent recalls the emotions of youth. But I start and, behold, it has all melted away. Yet there is something fine, too, in the idea of oblivion. It puts a seal upon prying fingers. Who would not wish to be forgotten

The Echo of Voices

when he is dead? Who would not rather be dust with the dust of those he has cared for than be assured of immortality with an unknown generation?"

He suddenly laughed.

"Well, there I am on my high horse again," he concluded. "But don't you think it's getting very cold? We had better make for the house."

And, without speaking further, we went out of the orchard together.

PROPERTY
OF THE
NEW YORK
ACADEMY LIBRARY

